

Adventures in Adept Training

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Summary: Akiko About time, ne? Well, it's the moment you've all been waiting for...

***Chapter 1*: Chapter 1 Part 1**

Chapter 1

Dishwater blonde hair flopping into his blue eyes, Isaac dodged another cart trundling down the cobbled street. The driver yelled curses at him, trying to be heard over the clatter of the iron shod wheels. Isaac paid him no heed, slipping through the crowds of people with the ease of someone who has been doing so for years.

It was a beautiful day, after a long, hard winter. Beyond the village tender shoots of new grass had begun to appear, and the first daffodils and narcissus were beginning to show their shy faces. The bare branches of trees had become green with new leaflets overnight, and birds could be Dishwater blonde hair flopping into his blue eyes, Isaac dodged another cart trundling down the cobbled street. The driver yelled curses at him, trying to be heard over the clatter of the iron shod wheels. Isaac paid him no heed, slipping through the crowds of people with the ease of someone who has been doing so for years. The bare branches of trees had become green with new leaflets overnight, and birds could be heard giving full chorus to Spring.

Within the confines of the village, however, everything was dead and paved over. Yet the wind that blew along the streets was pleasantly cool in the hot sun, and no longer carried the stench of winger. Isaac knew Summer was fast approaching. Not because of the green without, or the warmth, but because he could feel it in his bones, despite the constricted feeling he had whenever he went into town. Hama told him it was because he was a Venus Adept, and could feel the seasons changing in his soul.

Which made very little sense to any other eight-year-old.

Finally, he reached his destination. A small stand set between and slightly behind two larger stands. Ducking beneath the arm of a rather large man and squeezing between two wispy women, he made it to the wooden counter that he could just barely see over.

"Isaac, dear! Back again?" the elderly woman behind the counter turned and smiled at him. At one time she had been beautiful, but that beauty had faded over the years. Her face was lined and care-worn, and her once auburn hair was now a silver grey. "You are such a dear, running errands for Hama."

"I'm her apprentice, ma'am!" he told her, like he told her ever market day, and put his basket up on the counter top. "It's part of my training to do what Master Hama asks!"

"I'll expect you'll be wanting what you usually get," she smiled again, deepening the creases around her mouth and eyes.

"Yes, ma'am!" Isaac confirmed, fishing the pouch of money Hama had given him from a pocket on the inside of his vest. He tried to ignore the meat pies cooling on the counter, and their enticing scent.

Hama had only given him enough to buy the herbs she needed from the old lady's stand, and he couldn't ignore his Master's orders. His stomach protested, he hadn't had breakfast, and already it was far past noon. He ignored that little fact, too.

"Here you go, Isaac," the old lady handed the money pouch back, no limp and empty, along with the basket containing a

bottle of some liquid and several cloth bags full of powders and dry herbs.

"Thank you, ma'am!" he replace the pouch in his pocket, put the basket handle in the crook of his arm and bowed slightly.

He was very much surprised when she gave him one of the meat pies. "Oh, no, ma'am I couldn't, I don't have any more money and-"

"It's on the house, dear," her eyes softened. "I know a hungry little boy when I see one. Now, get back with you! You wouldn't want to keep Hama waiting, would you?"

"No, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am," he bowed again before melting back into the crowd.

Hama's home was well away from the town's outskirts. It looked more like a Chinese Temple than a house. The dark roofed, white walled building was three stories tall, but was dwarfed by the forest trees around it. A small, manicured lawn ran up to the stream that wandered in front of it. Tiny cherry trees spread their way ward branches over the grass and little flower gardens.

"Master Hama!" he called out once he had opened the front door and flown into the house. The inside was very different from the strict looking outside. Rambling staircases and rooms were thrown together with no particular order in mind. Twisting hallways that led to dead ends and rooms of no significance filled the levels of the house. Hama had told him it was to confuse any enemies that might try to enter her home.

"Master Hama?" Isaac called out again.

"Yes, Isaac, I'm home," Hama strode towards him from on of the hallways. She was still very young, though a widower. Her violet hair was piled on top of her head, but unbound it fell to her waist. She was wearing a pale blue dress, very simple in style. "Have you done what I asked?"

"Yes, Master Hama," Isaac held out the basket with one hand and retrieved the money pouch from his pocket with the other. "Well done," she smiled and relieved him of his burden.

"Next week I will be needing new ingredients. Be prepared."

"Yes Master Hama, I will be," Isaac wasn't sure if the small tasks she gave them were actual training. He highly suspected that Hama simply did not have time to be running the countless errands she sent them on, the hundred of menial tasks her pupil's attended to, and train young children in the art of Alchemy all by herself.

Hama bent down to straiten the brown and green vest he wore over his tunic. "Garet and Mia are in the back, if you want to meet them. How about you see how their lessons are coming along?"

He bowed slightly. "Thank you, Master Hama."

Then, all formality quite suddenly shed, he bounded down one hallway, up a staircase, and down another. He knew his way around the strange house better than he knew himself, and could have found the back door with relative ease in the dark.

A wooden porch stretched the length of the house in the back, sheltered from the weather by a shingled overhang. Just outside of the door a young girl and boy were sitting cross-legged. The girl had blue hair tied back in a ponytail

that matched her blue and white vest. The boy had auburn hair that didn't seem to want to lie flat. Both had their backs to the door, and seemed to be concentrating on something a little ways off.

"Mia! Gareth!" Isaac slid the back door open and, with his usual energy, cannoned out onto the porch.

"Back already?" Mia turned. "I thought it would be another hour at least. That's how long Gareth takes when he goes to Market."

"Only because he has to look at everything," Isaac squeezed in-between his two friends.

"Only because I like the Market place," Gareth punched him lightly in the arm. "And you hate it."

Mia rolled her eyes. "Of course he hates it! He's a Venus Adept! Master Hama only makes him go because he has to get used to everything being paved over like that." Isaac nodded in agreement, it made sense. Trust Mia to make a reason for every task Master Hama set them to.

"And she makes me wash dishes because I'm a Mars Adept, and she makes you tend to the fires because you're a Mercury Adept," Gareth waved one hand. "So, why doesn't she make Ivan do anything?"

The trio fell silent at the mention of the fourth Adept under Hama. Ivan was only six, two years younger than the rest of them, but just as powerful. He was a Jupiter Adept, like Hama, and from the same clan. Unlike his three fellow Adepts, he still had parents that would take him back when he was finished with his training.

"Well, Ivan doesn't need to do anything, because nothing really bothers him," Mia said slowly, after a moment.

Garet snorted. "And he's got parents that pay for him to stay here."

"That, too."

Garet made a face but didn't bother to correct Mia. Isaac knew he was bitter, his own parents had abandoned him to the school when he showed the potential to use Psyenergy. Mia's poverty stricken grandparents left her in Hama's care "for the best".

Isaac didn't remember any of his relations. His parent had died in an accident when he was little, and the only family he remembered was at the school.

Ivan, on the other hand, was Hama's spoiled nephew. His parents paid their instructor to teach their only son, and he had learned quickly. What Ivan lacked in physical strength, he made up for with his devastating Psyenergy attacks. The members of the Jupiter Clan had the ability to read minds, tame storms, reveal what was hidden, and even predict the future. Which was much more than the rest of them could do.

"We need to train," Mia broke into Isaac's thoughts. "Master Hama is testing us tomorrow."

She motioned to a dark, pillar shaped rock two yards away from the edge of the porch. They had been moving the same rock a little to the left or the right with their Psyenergy for as long as Isaac could remember. The rock never went very far, but Hama insisted that they were improving each day.

"I've already tried," Gareth admitted. "It didn't go very far. Wanna give it a go, Isaac?"

"I guess so," moving objects wasn't one of Isaac's stronger skills. Gareth was much better than he was. Regardless, he lifted one hand and concentrated on moving the training stone.

Waves of Psyenergy swirled around him, and the stone scraped across the ground. He barely heard Mia's gasp or Gareth's whoop, his entire world narrowed on the stone, that glowed a deep emerald with power.

Quite suddenly, the power around him died down, leaving him feeling rather dizzy.

"You did it, Isaac!" Mia squealed. The stone had moved once again its own width to the left. The farthest he had ever managed to move it.

"I did it," he muttered, still feeling very disoriented. He shook his head to clear it.

"I did it!"

"Impressive, Isaac, to be sure."

They turned to see the source of the comment. A blonde boy with large purple eyes was standing there, his hands behind his back. He was a head shorter than Mia, and obviously younger.

Gareth stood up. "Hello, Ivan."

"Good afternoon, Gareth," Ivan spared Gareth a curt nod. "I hope you are well?"

"I'm okay."

Isaac and Mia rose to their feet, keeping a wary eye on Ivan. He had been known to knock them off the porch when they were unbalanced, but today he made no move. Either he was feeling particularly malicious and would wait until they were on the bridge, or he wasn't in the mood.

"How are you?" Mia inquired, much quieter than she usually was. Despite her ability to reason away all faults, she wasn't overly fond of Ivan.

"I am well," he stepped forward and sat on the edge of the porch, his legs dangling over the side. He was unconcerned that he was in a defenseless position in sight of his three worst enemies. It was mockery enough to cause Isaac's ears to burn with shame. "After all, the day is beautiful. Perhaps you should practice your Frost technique on the bridge, Mia. I am sure your companions will join you."

Isaac glared at him. He knew that if Mia followed his near order, Isaac and Gareth would go only to watch her back. Not that it would help, much. Mia's earlier assessment had been correct, nothing really phased a Jupiter Adept. Even if it did, Ivan was a lot faster than any of them.

What was worse, nobody expected Ivan to be the bully. He was younger, smaller, and completely calm in almost any situation. Most assumed that Gareth was the bully, hot headed, strong, and taller than any of them.

Even Hama, who could read minds, simply assumed.

"Well, aren't you going?" there was an impatient note in Ivan's voice. Mia bit her lip, she didn't want to be pushed into the stream anymore than she had to. Last week she had gotten her new vest stained with mud, and Hama had

blamed the entire fiasco on her. The week before that, she had been practicing the frost technique. Ivan had pushed her face first into icy, waist deep water without remorse. Which was enough to make Isaac's blood boil.

"I'm going," Mia finally said, turning to enter the house. It was right then that Isaac lost his temper. Surprising even himself, he kicked Ivan squarely between the shoulder blades. With a strangled noise, the Jupiter Adept toppled off of the porch and to the ground, two feet away. In an instant, Isaac was on top of him, kicking and hitting for all he was worth. It was almost like using Psyenergy. He focused completely on Ivan, and how much he could hurt the little worm. Somewhere in the back of his mind he realized that Mia was screaming, and Garet seemed to be shouting words of encouragement, but he barely noticed. He could hardly register that Ivan was fighting back.

Something grabbed the back of his vest and hauled him off of Ivan. He struggled for a moment before realizing it was Hama.

"Isaac! What are you doing?!" she sounded horrified.

"He was going to push Mia into the stream," he answered quietly, giddy from the adrenaline rush. "I was not," Ivan stood up. Isaac noted with some satisfaction that he had two black eyes, a bloody nose, a split lip, and from the way he was moving various other injuries. "I just suggested that she should go practice Frost when he kicked me off the porch."

"Isaac, you don't know that Ivan was going to push Mia," Hama turned him around and kneeled so she was eye level with him. "Did you?"

"He was," the giddiness was wearing off, leaving Isaac feeling exhausted. "He's done it before, and he was going to

do it again and I just wanted to stop him"

Without warning he started sobbing. He was throbbing, Ivan had kicked him in the side hard enough to leave bruises, and Hama didn't believe him. It wouldn't have mattered if Ivan had pushed Mia into the stream, Hama didn't want to believe that Ivan was the culprit. Hama pulled a handkerchief from one of the pockets on her dress and dabbed at his tears. "Isaac don't cry. Come inside, we'll all talk about this."

He nodded and followed her up the porch stairs and into the house. Ivan, Garet, and Mia followed closely. The walk up to the boy's rooms seemed to take much longer than it usually did. Isaac scrubbed furiously at the last of his tears with his sleeve. First he had disobeyed the rules Hama had laid down for him as a toddler, then he had to cry about it. Mia looked like she didn't know whether to scold him or thank him, but Garet applauded him.

"I've been wanting to do that ever since he came here," he said wistfully. "Next time, you can kick him down the stairs."

Mia gave him a disapproving look, and Isaac smiled. Garet was right, whatever punishment Hama decided to give him, it would be worth getting the best of Ivan. Even if it was just this once.

Polishing every floor until it shone was Isaac's sentence. Whatever Ivan's punishment was, if he had one, he never found out. Hama had sent him out so she could discuss the matter privately with Ivan. Most likely a slap on the wrist, from what Isaac could see, he wasn't given extra chores.

Towards the middle of his punishment, Isaac was wishing bitterly that he HAD kicked Ivan down the stairs. Hama had strictly forbidden healing of any kind for their injuries. The slightest movement sent fire lancing across his bruised ribs, and the other tender spots from Ivan's kicks were no better.

Between cleaning the floors, training, and other small tasks he was set to, like bringing in wood for the fire, he was left exhausted and sore at the end of each day. Every morning he woke up not the least bit refreshed, and so stiff he could barely move.

A week later the floors were clean, the purple and black bruises had faded to yellow, and he was getting a full night's sleep. It was at this time that Hama told them what would be occurring later that day.

"My good friend Master Feh and his daughter Feizhi re coming," she explained. "They are not Adepts, but Feh runs a school for Kung Fu, and he is the reason that this school is kept running. I want you all to be on your best behavior."

"Yes, Master Hama. We will, Master Hama," the chorused.

Hama seemed satisfied with this, and nodded. "Alright, we have some chores to do before they arrive this evening. I need you four to air out the guest rooms on the third floor, bring in firewood, and clean the windows."

"Yes, Master Hama."

They finished breakfast and tried to decide how to go about the day's tasks. Gareth suggested that they all fight it out, but Mia quickly put an end to that idea.

"I'll wash the windows if Isaac and Gareth will go get the firewood," Ivan suggested. They looked at him,

astonished. Both Gareth and Isaac highly doubted that Ivan had done any work in his entire life, and bringing in the firewood was simple compared to the task Ivan was volunteering to take on.

"Then I'll air out the guest rooms," Mia shooed them away. "Hurry! We don't want to disappoint Master Hama, now, do we?"

Nodding, they set out on their various tasks. Gareth was not impressed with Ivan's willingness. "Probably didn't want to get splinters," he muttered, dumping his load to the side of the house. Isaac began adding the sticks to the small pile stacked neatly against the wall. "Probably thought soap and water would be better for his hands."

"Maybe," Isaac used his teeth to pull a splinter out of his thumb before he continued stacking. "But that much water will soften the calluses we get from training." Gareth ignored him. "And he's too short, anyway. I don't see why he volunteered to do the windows."

"If you want to do the windows, I'm sure Ivan would appreciate the help," Isaac interrupted his complaints. "I can do this by myself."

Gareth shook his head. "No, we'll help him when we're done."

"But-"

"I thought we were supposed to be learning teamwork and that many hands make light work," Gareth pointed out. "Even if we hate each other, WE can't do anything until the windows are washed."

Isaac felt the heat rising to his face, and bowed his head over his work to hide it. It wasn't often that Gareth was

insightful, but when he was, it made far too much sense.
"You're right," he muttered. "I'm sorry, it's just it's just"

"You hate him?" Gareth supplied. Isaac shook his head vigorously. He didn't hate anyone, not yet, anyway.

"I think he's afraid of me," he admitted. "I've been the only person stupid enough to beat him ever since he came here."

"Maybe," Gareth shrugged. "You'll have to keep yourself entertained. We still have work to do!"

That said, he trotted into the woods. Isaac stacked up what remained of the pile Gareth had brought and sat back to wait for him to bring more.

"Isaac?"

He whipped around to face whoever had spoken, but it was only Ivan. "Do you ENJOY sneaking up on people like that?"

"Sorry," he didn't sound completely sincere, but Isaac accepted his apology anyway.

"It's just I can't reach the top of the windows "

"You want my help," Isaac realized this had to be very hard for Ivan. Coming to ask for help, coming to him of all people
"Alright. Gareth can do this by himself."

Next Part

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 1 Part 2**

The windows were cleaned quickly and efficiently, with hardly two words passing between them. They wouldn't have spoken, if not for a small incident in which Isaac fell off of the stool, the bucket of soapy water upending on his head. He had laughed at himself for nearly a minute before Ivan joined him.

Now the trainees themselves had been scrubbed clean and bedecked in brand new tunics. Hama had even purchased them new vests, which showed their element by design rather than color.

Now they awaited the arrival of their two guests somewhat patiently, only shifting occasionally from their kneeling position on the floor. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity (but was really less than half an hour), a knock sounded at the door. Hama answered it, today dressed in a flowing violet kimono that matched her hair. "Ah, Master Feh! Feizhi! It's so good to see you again!"

She embraced an older man with graying hair and beard, and a girl who couldn't be any older than the trainees. She had the same purple hair as Hama, tied back in a high knot, and seemed extremely curious.

"These are my students," Hama waved one hand and they bowed respectfully before rising. She introduced each of them by name and element.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Master Feh, Feizhi. Welcome to our home," they chorused, bowing slightly again.

"I will have to see them train," Master Feh eyed them, thoughtfully.

"Please, the journey has made you weary," Hama turned to her students. "Isaac, will you please show Master Feh and Feizhi to their rooms?"

Isaac nodded and began leading them through the twisted corridors. Feizhi had a limitless supply of questions for him. "You know your way around here, don't you? How long have you lived here? Who are your parents? How-"

"Feizhi! Allow the boy to answer," Feh chuckled.

"I know my way around well enough," Isaac took a right hand passage. "I've been here ever since I can remember, and I have no parents."

"Oh, sorry," Feizhi was silent for a moment. "Are the others like you?"

"Garet and Ivan both have parents that are still alive, and Mia has her grandparents," two more rights, up a staircase, a left, and down a hallway.

"I understand that Hama is a hard taskmaster," Feh took Feizhi's role in making conversation.

"She is," Isaac nodded, leading them up yet another staircase. "We train every day with her and on our own. You'll be able to see us, your room is right above our training ground."

"Do you enjoy it here?"

Isaac answered him truthfully. "I do, most of the time. I don't like getting up at dawn and I don't like skipping meals

because of training."

Feh chuckled again at his response. Before a reply could be made, they reached the rooms.

"Here you are," Isaac bowed slightly. "I or one of my fellow trainees will come for when it is time for supper."

"Thank you, Isaac," Feh bowed in return. "You are a fine lad, tell Hama that for me."

Isaac flushed at the compliment. "Thank you, sir."

He turned and trotted in the direction from which they had come, his step light. Not even extra chores could have wiped the smile from his face.

Something else, however, did.

Upon reaching the entryway, he heard Hama speaking in a harsh tone. He had never heard her like that, and wondered who the unfortunate on the receiving end was. He didn't have to wait long to find out.

"And you, a member of the Jupiter Clan! I am ashamed to call you my kin."

"Aunt Hama" Ivan said in response, as if trying to defend himself. "There's nothing wrong with that."

"If Feh knew, though."

Isaac decided this would be a good time to leave. He backed up slowly, then ran softly down the corridor, desperately hoping that Hama had been too preoccupied to be casting for nearby minds.

Outside he found Gareth and Mia, conversing lightly rather than training. He cut into Mia's chattering to tell them what little he had overheard.

"Why would Hama be ashamed of Ivan?" Mia asked after a moment of thoughtful silence.

"I dunno," Gareth admitted, and Isaac shook his head. "Maybe there's something wrong with 'im?"

"He's a bully," Isaac added. "And he's pretty worthless. Sure, he's a strong Adept, but he barely knows how to use a weapon, and he's kind of a coward-"

Mia motioned violently for him to be quiet, but it was too late. Ivan was standing in the door Isaac had left open, his face unreadable. Without a word he turned and went back into the house, shutting the door behind him.

Mia glared lividly at Isaac, who smiled weakly and shrugged. "Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"That doesn't give you any right to say so."

Isaac retrieved Feh and his daughter for supper. The entire way to the dining room, which was on the first floor next to the kitchen, they asked Isaac questions about his situation at the school. He answered them politely and honestly, just as Hama had taught him, blushing when Feh complimented him on his training.

"What would you say if you had the chance to leave this school?" Feh asked as they came to the door. Isaac stopped short. "I I'm not sure."

"Well, you think about it," Feh smiled kindly at him before they entered the dining room.

The food, prepared by Hama herself, was already laid out on the table. Feh and Feizhi took their seats at one end, and Isaac left them for his normal place next to Gareth, just across from Mia. Normally meals were quick bites between chores and training, but this dinner was a feast.

Every kind of food he had ever seen was on the table, and some he hadn't. He loaded his plate with a bit of everything, and began to stuff himself. Hama might tell him off later for being a glutton in front of company, but he couldn't care less.

When dinner was finished, Hama shooed the children out, including Feizhi, so she could talk with Feh.

"I wanna listen," Feizhi whispered when Hama re-entered the dining room, tiptoeing back to the ajar door.

"No, we can't!" Mia hissed, grabbing the other girl's arm.

"I never said you had to," Feizhi jerked her arm from Mia's grasp and leaned in close to the door. Isaac and Gareth were quick to join her. Ivan looked a bit awkward, standing alone in the dark passage way. In the minimal light he looked pale and scared. Mia hovered worriedly in the background, but didn't leave herself.

"Delightful children, Hama," they heard Feh saying. "You've raised them well." "They're delightful most of the time," Hama answered, sounding amused. "Have you decided on one? Perhaps Ivan, or Gareth would be an excellent choice." Ivan went stark white, and Gareth gave Isaac a quizzical look. The conversation continued.

"Actually, I have made up my mind," Feh said, from the creak of wood that followed he had settled farther into his chair. "That young boy, Isaac."

Isaac went numb. Gareth was looking at him with surprise, and Ivan let out an ill suppressed sigh of relief.

A tinkle of shattering china. "I-Isaac? W-why?"

"He's a fine lad, and he seems to be a strong Adept," Feh replied.

"Feh, please, anyone but Isaac," Hama sounded strangled, as if she was holding back tears, and a note of panic had entered her voice. "Take Ivan, take Gareth, for goodness sakes take Mia but please don't take Isaac."

"Hama, I keep this school running," Feh started to sound angry. "Without me you wouldn't have the financial means to keep this school open. I could, of course, take your debts up with the leaders of this village."

"This school will be sold and you and your trainees will be put into enslavement, and Isaac will be trained to lead my armies anyway," Feh's voice had a note of finality in it, accompanied by the chink of glass being set one wood. "It's your choice."

Hama sounded lost. "Alright, take Isaac. I-I've discovered three more Adepts in need of shelter I can't deny them that for one boy."

"Wise choice, Hama. We'll be leaving at dawn"

"You're the Leader!" Feizhi looked up at Isaac with something close to adoration. He felt as if the bottom of his stomach had dropped out.

"Of what?" Mia whispered hoarsely.

"Of our army against Gondowan, of course!"

"Isaac?" Gareth was tugging on his sleeve. "Isaac?"

He was at a loss for words.

It was nearing dawn.

The full realization of what was about to happen was finally hitting Isaac. No more trying to please Hama, no more avoiding Ivan, no more Mia and Gareth.

Ivan, Gareth, and Mia stayed with him all night. Gareth kept on telling him all of the way in which his life would be better ("Imagine, I bet Feh wouldn't even LET the leader of his armies do chores") and Mia constantly patted his hand and told him it would "be alright", trying to hide her tears.

Ivan didn't said a word until the sky began to turn grey. "It was supposed to be me, Isaac." "Then why aren't you going?" Isaac's voice sounded dead, even to him.

"Because I was afraid," Ivan admitted. "That's what you heard Hama lecturing me about. I wanted to stay here, I didn't want to leave this school, ever. Hama couldn't understand that. Feh made the right choice, Isaac. You're a powerful Adept, but you're also brave and loyal. A lot better than me," he half smiled, but it looked oddly strained in the candlelight. "You should be happy. Not only does Feh want you to lead his armies, but Hama didn't want to give you up. You draw everyone to you, don't you, Isaac."

Isaac could only stare at the younger boy.

"Isaac," Mia choked after a moment. "This this can't be happening."

She sobbed, and hugged him. Isaac was shocked, and felt more than a little awkward. He hadn't been hugged many times in his life. She held on to him for a full minute before pulling away, trying to hold her tear back with her hands. Gareth was blinking hard, as if trying to keep his own tears back.

"Isaac," he croaked. "Don't forget us, alright? Don't you dare ever forget us."

"I-I won't," he realized he was close to tears himself. "Hey, Ivan?"

"Yeah?" the Jupiter Adept looked surprised.

"Don't beat on Gareth and Mia too bad, okay?" he blinked furiously, but the tears were escaping anyway, sliding down his cheeks. "Promise me."

"O-okay," Ivan nodded, trying to smile. "I promise."

They sat in silence, only Mia's sniffles breaking it. There was nothing to disguise the sound of footsteps down the hall, or the soft knock on the door. The portal opened, and Hama looked in. "Isaac oh, I see you've heard," she smiled sadly at the other three Adepts. "Alright, then, come with me."

Isaac, feeling strangely empty, got up and turned to the other three. "Well, bye, then."

"Good bye, Isaac," Gareth wiped a hand across his eyes. "Remember don't forget."

"I won't," Isaac promised. He followed Hama down the hall.

The school was silent, still dark in the early morning hours. The familiar corridors became eerie and haunted. Hama led Isaac towards the front doors. His heart became heavier and heavier with each step he took.

Feh was standing at the entrance. He put a fatherly hand on Isaac's shoulder and led him outside. A carriage drawn by two horses was just on the other side of the stream, on the road. Feizhi waved at him from the driver's seat, where she had been conversing with the driver, a rather fat brunette man that Isaac had never seen before.

"Hsu!" Feh waved merrily. "Glad you could make it!"

"Glad I could be here, sir!" Hsu waved back. "Is this him? Our Leader?"

"He is, this is Isaac, a Venus Adept," the grip on Isaac's shoulder tightened, putting off all vague ideas of simple running for it. He couldn't have, anyway. What would happen to the school, Hama, and the others if he did? "He's a fine lad, and a strong Adept. He will serve Angora well.

"Isaac," Hama said softly from behind him. Feh released him, and he turned slowly. Hama knelt down, and did something she had only done once. She gathered Isaac into her arms, held him close, and whispered into his hair. "Don't forget who you are, Isaac. Don't forget what life is like without war, please don't become someone who only knows war and bloodshed. And don't forget about the people who love you."

She continued to hold him, rocking back and forth, shaking. It took a moment for Isaac to realize she was crying. He

wished she wouldn't, he was having problems controlling his own emotions.

Hama." Feh cut in after a few minutes, sounding slightly annoyed. "We must get going. It's a long journey back to Xian."

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry," Hama let Isaac go, but kept her hands on his shoulders. She looked into his eyes, her own filled with tears.

"Remember, Isaac. Never forget who you are."

She kissed him on the cheek, something she had never done with anyone, stood, and walked into the house without looking back.

Isaac had watched the only home he had known disappear amidst the trees before falling into an uneasy sleep full of nightmares.

When he woke up, it was only because Feizhi had brought him a tray of food. He wasn't hungry, and when he was awake the faces of the people he had left behind came back faster and clearer than they had in the dream world. He stared out the window at the passing scenery for a time until they left forest and scrub lands behind, entering a desert. The endless sand and rocks quickly bored him, and he turned his attention inward.

The interior of the carriage was comfortable enough. It was colored in dark browns, the walls slitted by windows. Oversized cushions spilled over the benches lining the sides. Feh sat across from him, slumped down in his seat and

snoring softly. Feizhi was gazing out of one of the thin windows.

"How far away is Xian from Kalay?" he asked. Feizhi jumped at the sound of his voice, then turned to face him, eyes wide.

"Isaac, don't do that!" she scolded him. He waited patiently for an answer to his question. "Well, once we're on the other side of the Lamakan desert we'll probably go through the Altin pass and end up in Xian. It shouldn't take more than a few hours."

"Oh. Thank you," Isaac thanked her, then settled further in his seat, preparing to fall back into ignorant sleep.

Feizhi, however, had taken his question as an invitation for conversation. "Isaac, are you afraid? To lead the armies of Angora against Gondowan?"

"Who wouldn't be?" the full weight of the direction his life was going to take was beginning to sink in. With it, came an overwhelming fear. "It's a big job, and I'm not ready for it."

Ignoring all further questions from the violet haired girl, he settled back into his cushion and once again sought after blissful ignorance. Sleep, however, chose to elude him.

The newest Adepts arrived over the next three weeks

There were three of them, a brother and sister from Vale named Felix and Jenna whose parents had recently died, and an orphaned boy from Imil named Alex.

Hama had been keeping the other three Adepts busy, if only to keep their minds on something other than their best

friend's recent departure. The new Adepts were a blessing.

"Jenna, Felix, I want you to train with Gareth," Hama instructed the siblings. They both had brown hair and big brown eyes. Felix was the elder, and often very protective of his little sister. "He's a Mars Adept like Jenna, and his abilities are very similar to that of a Venus Adept like yourself, Felix. Alex, I want you to train with Mia, she's a Mercury Adept like you."

"Okay," the blue-haired boy, who seemed to be having little trouble adjusting grinned faintly.

"Good," Hama turned and entered the house.

"C'mon," Mia smiled warmly at Alex. "We can practice Frost in the stream. Do you want to come, Ivan?"

She looked at the Jupiter Adept, who was the only one without a partner. Ivan, however, only smiled. "No, I'm going to work on getting that ball out of the tree Gareth kicked it into last week. There's nothing to do without it during free time, 'specially for the new kids."

"There are PLENTY of things to do besides roll that dumb ball around," Gareth defended himself as he passed by, leading Felix and Jenna to the back of the house. "It's just most of them involve a stick and using it on Ivan."

"Precisely," Ivan said, dryly. Mia glared at Gareth, Alex laughed, and the siblings smiled weakly. "I'm going to get the ball down."

"fine, fine, have it your way," Gareth ignored Mia's scowl and continued on his way. "Now, there's a technique called 'move', and it works really, really well on big, heavy objects like Ivan's head"

This time, Jenna and Felix joined Alex in his laughter.

"Garet!" Mia protested, looking dangerously close to laughing herself. "That's not funny!"

"Yes it is," Garet looked over his shoulder, grinning obnoxiously.

"Oh, yes, a riot," Ivan agreed sarcastically, but even he couldn't hide his smile. "You're an idiot, y'know that, Garet?"

Hama closed the door to her personal study softly behind her. The room normally had a calming effect on her, but not today.

I'm happy the new Adepts are here, she thought ruefully.
This house felt so empty without Isaac and it will give the other children something else to keep their minds on. This has been hard on us all.

She sank to her knees, sobbing softly. *Feh you monster.*

Xian was a completely different world for Isaac.

Homespun tunics and worn leather breeches were replaced with silk shirts, loose pants, and flowing kimonos. Boots had no place here, all of the citizens were wearing soft slippers. Men and women alike wore their hair long, tied back in high knots and buns. The houses looked more like the school than the stone and wood dwelling in Kalay that Isaac was used to. The paths weren't paved, merely hard packed dirt, and plants were allowed to grow freely.

Despite himself, Isaac found himself liking it.

Feh led him through the gates, and many people stopped what they were doing immediately.

"Welcome back, Master Feh," an older man bowed slightly.

The people cheered. Isaac had the sudden urge to hide behind Hsu, who was holding him back from doing just that, presenting him to the crowd like an expensive souvenir.

"Come, Isaac," Feh said to him. "Let's get you clothed and fed. You'll need plenty of rest, your training begins tomorrow."

Isaac was taken through town to a house much larger than the others, set up on a ridge near the wall surrounding Xian. It was so reminiscent of the school that his heart ached dully. He wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing that the inside was completely different. Instead of the twisting corridors and staircases it was a sunny, open room, a single door off to the side. Within the room several children were sitting on cushions or the floor, conversing quietly. The moment Feh entered they jumped to their feet.

"As you were," Feh commanded. The children instantly sat back down, and Feh lead Isaac to the side door.

On the other side was a small, cozy room that was obviously a parlor. It had a wooden floor, graced by an indigo and emerald rug. Large porcelain vases lined the walls.

"Welcome to your new home, Isaac," Feh used one arm to indicate the entire room. "Feizhi will show you to your room. I am going to get the tailor."

Isaac sat heavily in one of the cushions near the grate that held only cold ashes.

I want to go home, he thought, pulling his knees up to his chest and resting his forehead on them. *Oh, I really want to go home.*

Isaac didn't realize he was crying until the tears soaked through the knees of his breeches.

Chapter 2

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 2**

Chapter 2

"Alex!"

He looked up at the sound of his name. Mia was stalking towards him, looking remarkably like a large and angry lioness. She stopped just short of him, putting her fists on her hips.

"Good morning, Mia," he smiled, rising from his sitting position on the porch.

"It's four o'clock in the afternoon," she pointed out. "You told him, didn't you."

The abrupt change of subjects from time to tattling startled Alex enough that he took a step back. Despite the fact that Mia was a good head shorter than him, he was finding her rather frightening in this mood. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You told him," she jabbed her finger into his chest to emphasize each word, and he retreated even more until his back met the wall. "You said you wouldn't! You promised!"

"Ooh, that," Alex tried to smile, but the attempt was weak. "Sorry, it slipped."

"It SLIPPED?!"

"Well, yeah," he scratched the back of his head nervously.

"Oh, c'mon, Mia! Garet and Ivan cornered me and threatened to first burn me to a crisp and then mind read me so I had to tell them!"

"So he knows," all of Mia's anger fled and she sighed. "What did he say?"

Luckily for Alex, Gareth chose that precise moment to round the corner, and he didn't have to answer. "Mia!"

"Oh, good morning, Gareth," she smiled weakly at the Mars Adept Alex took her momentary lapse of attention on him to edge along the wall towards the door. "Did you want to tell me something?"

"Well, first of all, it's four o'clock in the afternoon."

Alex managed to sip into the school and close the door before he could hear anymore. He turned to head to his room, and nearly ran into Felix, who had been heading for the porch. The Venus Adept stopped and stared at him. "Is something going on out there that I should know about?"

"A meeting of potential significant others," Alex ran his fingers through his long, blue hair. He needed a haircut.

"Ah, Gareth and Mia," Felix gave him a sympathetic look from behind his bangs. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Alex replied, deducted that despite Felix's hair tie, he needed a trim, too. "For all I know, Mia and I are related. Now, Jenna, on the other hand hey, don't give me that look."

Felix started. "What look?"

"That 'you-break-her-heart-and-I'll-break-you' look," Alex explained as if to a very small child. "The look you give me whenever I even MENTION Jenna."

"I do NOT."

"Do too."

"I don't even have a 'you-break-her-heart-and-I'll-break-you' look," Felix defended himself. "I have a 'don't-touch-my-sister' look, but I normally reserve it for that creepy guy with the cart."

Alex laughed. "He is creepy."

"Creepier than you, even."

"Hey, I'm not a little sixty-year-old man that drives around in a cart trying to court seventeen-year-old girls, now, am I."

"What are you boys talking about?" Hama's voice floated down the hallway.

"Nothing, Hama!" they chorused.

"Oh, then it must be your tangled love lives," Hama walked into the lamplight, which highlighted the silver streaks in her hair, and deepened the lines underneath her eyes. "I suppose Gareth is admitting some things to a certain Mercury Adept."

"And she's admitting just as much," Alex supplied.

"You can't allow your heart to become confused, Alex," Hama warned him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "The war is coming, I'm afraid this school will not be overlooked by some commanders."

"You mean Isaac," Felix wasn't asking a question. Hama stiffened, even nine years later she still often prayed for the Venus Adept.

"Yes, I mean Isaac," she said softly.

By the end of the week, Gareth and Mia had tied the knot.

By the end of the week, Alex was tired.

He was tired of having only Ivan and Felix to talk to. He was tired of chasing the elusive Jenna. But most of all, he was tired of Mia and Gareth walking down the hall holding hands, Mia giggling and Gareth blushing almost constantly.

Which was why he was on the roof.

There was an immense oak growing on the edge property, and its branches offered an easy access to the roof. He used to sit up there when he was being taunted by any of the other Adepts, or simply wanted to be alone. Which had been a lot, until he had become fast friends with Mia and Felix.

And now Mia was with Gareth, and Felix was busy spending "quality family time" with Jenna. He had no idea what Ivan might be up to, and he decided he really didn't want to know. The story that Ivan tortured small fuzzy things instead of picking on the Adepts that Gareth had told him never faded away. He hadn't looked at Ivan the same way again.

All of these were the reason why he saw them first.

There were four of them. Three of the riders were huge. They were wearing breast plates and short capes, broadswords at their sides.

Their muscled arms were left bare, their features hidden by helmets.

The rider in front appeared to be younger than Alex. But whatever his age, he carried himself with the air of someone

who was used to leading. He was wearing a blue and white uniform, gold bars embroidered on the shoulders, and indigo cape spilling over the black and silver saddle. The white horse beneath him didn't even fidget under his hold. From where Alex was, he could only make out that the rider had blonde hair.

The younger one, whom Alex assumed was either a noble or their leader, made some motion and they dismounted as one. The now obvious leader handed the reigns of his horse to one of his followers, and strode towards the doors of the school. Alex backed up slowly until the backs of his knees touched a branch. He turned and leapt lightly onto it, holding the branches above him to keep him steady, and slowly walked towards the trunk.

He was half way there when one of the soldiers yelled. He began to move faster, and was glad he did when a twang rent the air and something brushed past his cheek. And arrow thudded into the wood just behind him. At the sounds of more bowstrings being released, Alex ducked, hearing the impact of the arrows where his head had been moments before.

*If I jump they'll get me. If I stay here I can at least dodge the arrows, maybe * he crouched down between two large branches, his head between his knees. *What a day to die.*

"C'mon, you old hag," Isaac knocked harder still. "Open up the door."

The sound of a crossbow being drawn and shot behind him was unmistakable. Isaac whirled, to see his men shooting at

something in the trees.

"We're not on vacation," he said. "Put those away and leave the squirrels alone."

"There's someone in the tree, General," one of the men explained, calmly sighting along the shaft of his arrow and releasing it. "We didn't want him to run and give word to the other Adept."

"You're shooting at some kid in a tree," Isaac glared icily at the man. "Do you have no sense of honor?"

"General."

He pounded one mailed fist into the man's chest. "Have you learned nothing? Whoever is in that tree can't move, you should surround the trunk and order a surrender."

"But, if it's an Adept."

"If he's an Adept, I'll deal with him later," Isaac said. "Just keep your crossbows loaded. When he makes a move, and ONLY then, you can shoot him, got it?"

"Yes General."

Isaac turned on his heel and stalked towards the back of the school. If no one was answering the door, they were probably all in the back, with no idea to what was going on.

At the back of the house, the Adepts were relaxing. Hama had taken a vacation to visit the Lama Temple near the Lamakan Desert, leaving her students to themselves for the

next few weeks. Mia and Gareth were talking, partially paying attention to a chess game between Jenna and Felix. Alex was probably sulking, and Ivan had gone off to do something.

As long as he isn't torturing small animals, I don't care what he's up to, she decided. She leaned up against Gareth's shoulder, for the moment perfectly content.

"He's back."

Ivan's voice made them all jump. The Jupiter Adept had appeared out of nowhere, looking grave.

"Hello, Ivan," Mia managed to keep her voice steady. "Where have you been?"

"Who's back?" Gareth asked.

"He's back," Ivan repeated, quieter. "Isaac."

"I-Isaac?" Mia choked, sitting up strait.

"Yes, Isaac," Ivan nodded. "He's here, with four guards. But don't rush off like a fool, Mia. He isn't here because he's missed us all of these years. He needs recruits for Angora's army. Oh, and Alex is trapped in that stupid tree, by the way."

Gareth swore loudly.

"We have to save him," Jenna went pale.

"Alright," Mia forced her emotions under control. "Jenna, Felix, follow me. Gareth, you and Ivan go to the other side of the house. If we're lucky, we'll catch them by surprise."

"Let's hope," Ivan said softly, so soft she wasn't sure if she was supposed to hear it. He nodded, however, and followed

Garet to the right-hand side of the house. Mia motioned to Jenna and Felix, and dashed to the left.

And ran right into Isaac.

Isaac stumbled, pulled one arm around her to keep her steady, then promptly fell over, pulling her with him. They landed in a heap over the edge of the porch.

"Mia!" Garet's voice said from somewhere above her. She wondered vaguely why he wasn't in position. She felt his strong hands gripping her arms, and pulling her back onto the porch.

Isaac sat up, looking dazed and rather silly with leaves and flowers stuck in his hair. He stood up, brushing off his uniform and shaking out his cloak. He forgot about his hair. "Hi, Mia."

He was still shorter than Garet, but once he climbed on the porch, she could see that he was rather taller than her.

"Hi, Isaac," Mia managed. "I'm sorry are you alright?"

"Yeah, I have a hard head," he grinned. She found herself blushing, unsure what to say to him. "Are you alright?"

"You managed to save me," she smiled, trying very hard not to cry.

"What are you doing here?" Garet glared at him.

Ivan backed Garet. "More importantly, what do you want?"

"What do *I* want?" Isaac's eyes went distant. Mia noticed with a shiver how cold his eyes were. He wasn't the Isaac she knew. "What I want I want" he seemed to compose himself,

but his eyes didn't lose their hard, cold quality. "What I want is of no significance. I am here for Angora's need, nothing more, nothing less. And right now, we need more Adepts to fight against Gondowan. I believe that answers both questions.

Mia felt like crying, but not from happiness. Isaac, who had always been so fun loving, Isaac, who had always been so ready to smile.

That Isaac was dead, and this empty shell stood before her.

"Of course," Gareth's eyes narrowed.

"And do we have any choice in this matter?" Ivan asked.

"Everyone has a choice to live or die," Isaac's grin this time looked more predatory. Mia went completely cold. "What are your choices?"

"RUN!" Gareth yelled, casting Heat Wave as he did. Mia didn't question him, she leapt off of the porch and ran into the undergrowth, the others not far behind. Gareth didn't follow.

Alex crouched among the tree boughs, straining his ears for any sound that would betray his captor's presence.

Not a leaf stirred. He edged himself up carefully, trying very hard to not make any noise. A hissing noise was the only warning he had. Feathered death met him before he could move away. The thin shaft slid under his collar bone, near his throat. He choked at the sudden gush of blood, staining his vest and shirt a deep crimson. He tried to call out, for

anyone, for any form of help. All that came out was a small, strangled noise, and then he was falling.

He hit the ground, hard. He lay there, trying to blink away the dark spots swimming across his fading vision. One of the guards leaned over him, shaking his head.

"E's dyin'," he shrugged his muscular shoulders. "One less Adept, I suppose."

I can't die.

He was beginning to feel light headed and dizzy, and it was very hard to control his body. He lifted his left hand, which seemed to take an eternity. Everything around him was becoming fuzzy and out of focus.

He pressed his hand against the wound, screwed up his remaining energy, and cast Pure Ply just as everything faded to shades of grey.

Everything snapped back into focus, full color restored to the world around him. He closed his eyes to shut it all out, breathing evenly. He was healed, but he was exhausted.

"Go get Master Isaac!" one of the soldiers barked, and something sharp pressed into his throat. "He'll want to know about this."

Isaac drew his sword, cutting the Heat Wave attack in half, trying not to flinch when the two separate fires brushed past him. He had never been very good at trying to fight other

Adepts, and opportunity that didn't arise very often in Xian, particularly Mars Adepts.

"I'll do anything to keep them away from war," Gareth explained, softly. "But I won't go quietly."

"I would have been disappointed if you had," Isaac replied.

Garet smiled bitterly. "It's odd I never thought I'd have to fight you."

"Nor I, you," Isaac chose that moment to cast Ragnarok. In a sheen of golden light a broadsword appeared in the heavens, hitting Gareth head on, and disappeared in a shower of sparks.

The Mars Adept cast Pyroclasm, not even fazed by the Venus attack. Roaring torrents of flame erupted from the ground, exploding through the floor boards of the porch and scorching the side of the house. Isaac dropped to his knees, shielding his face from waves of overwhelming heat with his arms, his lungs seared by hot air and smoke.

At once the flames receded, leaving only vapor and ashes floating on the air.

Before Isaac had time to think or act more fire was coming at him in the form of Inferno. The blazing spheres shot in every direction, a few grazing him. On a normal human the effect would have been painful. On a Venus Adept, it was pure agony.

"Do you surrender?" Gareth asked, unaffected by the effects of the fire that had caught on to the porch and back wall of the school. A corona of heat surrounded him.

"I-I don't give up," Isaac managed to get his feet under him, holding a sword that now was little more than a blob of twisted metal on a pretty hilt in front of him. "I NEVER give up."

"Your choice," Gareth shrugged. "But everyone has the choice to live or die."

The hot air around Gareth ignited, forming into a long stream above him. A numb sensation began to take control of Isaac's senses, rendering him paralyzed.

He's going to use Dragon Fire, he realized, suddenly finding that the air was escaping him. *He's going to use Dragon Fire and I I I'm going to die.*

It was at that moment that one of Isaac's guards came around the corner. He took one look at the situation and decided that he needed to take action. "Master Isaac!"

"No! Go away!" Isaac tried to wave him on. "I'm FINE! I can HANDLE it!"

The soldier took no heed of his words. He drew his own sword and charged Gareth from behind with a yell. The Mars Adept released the unfinished spell quickly and spun around, drawing a pair of long knives from his boots as he did. He held them up, blocking the fatal downswing on the larger man's broadsword with a clang.

Isaac didn't see it. His vision was filled with a column of fire rushing towards him, roaring as if it were a real dragon.

Gareth was strong, but his opponent was stronger, taller, and more experienced with a blade. The older man was forcing

him back, any moment his shoulder blades would hit the wall, or some other obstacle.

Instead, he was backed through fire.

Must of over done it, but this works out nicely

Psynergy encircled him, the fire around him catching on to the colored energy. Flames surrounded him in lazy arcs, expanding with ever turn. The soldier, fear in his eyes, backed away.

Strait into one of the unsteady support beams.

The soldier's scream when his cloak caught on fire did nothing to mask the audible crack of burning wood.

The roof's gonna give out Isaac!

He stepped out onto the burning porch, just as part of the roof came down, right on top of him. His legs were trapped, there was no possible way that he could move.

I'll survive this, he reminded himself. **Isaac doesn't have a chance**

He looked up, and saw that the Fire Dragon had done as he had asked, encircling the Venus Adept in a ring of fire, growling softly. Isaac appeared to be unconscious. Garet banished the dragon with a thought, and racked his brains for a solution.

The roof creaked under the strain.

"This could be difficult," he muttered to himself, holding out one hand. Again Psynergy came to his beck and call, and he cast move.

Isaac rolled onto the grass.

The support beam fell as did the roof.

"Felix, Jenna, stay here," Mia ordered the siblings once she had caught her breath. They had gotten far into the woods before they realized that there was no pursuit, or any sign of Gareth. "I'm going back."

With that, she turned and ran off.

"Mia! It's too dangerous!" Ivan ran to catch up with the Mercury Adept. "Garet can take care of himself! He's fine!"

Mia whirled on him. "Ivan, leave me alone."

She turned on her heel and continued her headlong dash back to the school.

"Mia! Listen to me! Please!" Ivan managed to grab the back of her vest, stopping her in her tracks. "Garet's my friend, too, but he can take care of himself!" Ivan stood there

Mia turned again, to slap him hard across the face.

"Don't you dare assume how I feel," she hissed, voice deadly. "And don't even dare CALL yourself his friend."

"M-Mia."

When she continued to run, Ivan didn't stop here. He leaned against the trunk of a tree, putting one hand up to the tender skin.

There were tears on his cheek.

***Chapter 4*: Chapter 3**

Chapter 3

The entire back end of the school was on fire when Mia broke free of the tree line. Without a second thought, she cast glacier, smothering the flames in ice. She banished the crust of frozen water and looked frantically around the clearing.

"Garet? GARET?!"

She stepped closer, almost hesitantly, then noticed Isaac. The Venus Adept was unconscious, his clothes smoking feebly. Mia kneeled next to him and cast Pure Ply. Isaac's eyes opened, but he still looked dazed. He reached one hand towards her face, as if trying to discern whether she was really there or not. "M-Mia?"

"I'm here," she answered him softly. "You shouldn't move." He smiled faintly, and slipped back into unconsciousness. Mia slipped out of her vest and folded it into a pillow, placing it under his head with care. She removed Isaac's cloak, now scorched and tattered, and tucked it around his shoulders.

Then she rose to find Garet.

The porch was a mess. The roof had collapsed, littering the area with burned shingles and charred wood. Panicking, Mia began to shift the wood with her hands.

I wish Ivan was here, she couldn't help thinking. *He could find Garet in less than a minute.*

"Ivan?" she yelled, hoping that he would answer her despite her harsh words. "Ivan! I need your help!"

There was no answer, not even the birds were singing. Aside from her own struggles, everything was completely silent. Which must have attracted one of Isaac's guards.

She didn't hear him until the edge of a blade pressed into the soft tissue of her throat. She stiffened, trying not to

scream.

"What have you done?" a voice as cold and hard as the metal next to her skin asked.

"I found Isaac like this and healed him," she replied, trying to keep her panic and tears at bay. "I'm trying to find my friend, Gareth. The roof must have fallen on top of him."

The sword was taken away, and the guard knelt next to her. "If that is the truth, then I will help you, Healer."

Ivan rubbed his eyes dry. *This is no time to be crying. Mia needs my help, and so does Gareth, friend or not.*

He pushed himself away from the tree he had been leaning against and stumbled towards the school, feeling oddly drained. It had been a long time since he had cried, and it seemed to have taken everything out of him.

"Mia!" he yelled hoarsely when he reached the clearing.

One of Isaac's guards leapt to his feet, standing almost protectively in front of the Mercury adept. Ivan almost laughed. The man didn't seem to realize that the girl he was protecting was capable of killing him with a thought.

"No!" Mia put a restraining hand on the man's arm when he went for his sword. "He's a friend! Ivan, I need your help! I can't find Gareth, I think he's."

"Right," Ivan nodded and closed his eyes.

He was outside of himself, in a world composed of light and shadow. He could "see" everything around him the subtle emerald glow of the trees, the golden luminescence that was Isaac, the halo of bright azure halo that was Mia, and the roughly human shaped gentle radiance of mahogany that was the guard.

Oh, Gareth, please be alright, please be alright

What is he doing? I'm not sure if we can trust him

Night darkness confusion when did everything become so dark? Momma? Poppa?

Ivan shivered at Isaac's dreams, moving ahead quickly, used energy swirling around him in lavender waves.

The porch was pitch black. He bypassed beams of burned and broken wood with ease, until he found a flame of crimson Garet. It was dimmed, but there was no mistaking the Fire Adept, or the fact that he was still alive.

"*Mia, he's under the roof,*" he "said", a tendril of Psynergy reaching out to touch her. He almost recoiled before he had fully conveyed the message. Mia's anxiety and fear had hit him upon contact like a physical blow. "*He's unconscious, and wounded, but he's alive.*"

He sensed her understanding and began to return when something else jerked at his attention.

It was Isaac. The Venus Adept's dreams had become more violent, more disturbing than before. Vapors of hate, fear, anger, and pain were spreading from him like snakes of black smoke. Ivan ventured closer, and was pulled in.

It was chaos. A melee of shadows, faces, and blood. Ivan let loose a silent scream that nobody heard.

And then it was gone. Ivan couldn't move, couldn't think for a moment, before he was awake, in his own body, shivering. He fell to his knees, wrapping his arms around himself, feeling as if he was going to cry again.

"Ivan! Are you alright?"

"I-I-I'm fine," he winced, his shaking voice didn't sound convincing, even to him. "G-Garet he's."

He was shaking too much and couldn't finish. Mia ran to his side, looking worried. "What about Garet? Is he alright?"

Ivan only sat down completely and pulled his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around them.

"Ivan, where is he?" Mia's hand on his shoulder snapped him out of his reverie.

"I-I'll use lift," he stood, and nearly collapsed. Mia moved to support him, and the guard looked scared.

"Ivan? What happened? What's wrong? You were out of it for so long what were you doing?"

"It's nothing," this time, Ivan managed to keep his voice from shaking. He pushed Mia's helping hands away from him. "I'm fine."

He moved towards the porch, remember Gareth's position, and lifted one hand. Rings of Psynergy came at his call, the wood shuddered, then rose, glowing faintly with power. Gareth wasn't looking too good. He was lying face down, but Ivan could tell from where he was standing that he was badly hurt. Many of his bones were sticking out at odd angles, and a pool of blood had gathered beneath them. He heard Mia gasp behind him.

"Get him," Ivan ordered her through gritted teeth. "I don't know how long I can hold this."

Mia obliged, as did Isaac's guard, though the latter was some what reluctant to run under the falling wood. Together they pulled out the injured Mars Adept from the wreckage. Ivan let the wood drop once they were out of the way. It took much more out of him then he thought possible. He watched Mia cast Pure Ply groggily. The blue and white light pulled the broken bones back into their original position. The cuts on his face and torso closed up, and his bruises faded away. "He's going to be fine," Mia turned to him, tears of gratitude in her eyes. "Thank you, Ivan."

He managed to nod in response before his legs gave out beneath him, and the world became a void of nothing.

Mia entered the clearing where she had left Jenna and Felix. Jenna appeared to be in near hysterics, and Felix was doing his best to calm her down.

"Felix, Jenna," she said softly. They both looked up in alarm, then relaxed slightly when they realized who it was. "It's safe now, we can go back to the school."

"O-okay," Jenna nodded, drying stray tears with her sleeve. Felix nodded and got to his feet, pulling his sister with him.

They made their way back to the school, to find Gareth and Ivan fully conscious, and a heavily guarded Alex. The Mercury Adept was covered with blood, a tear in his shirt dangerously close to his heart. He looked up and waved cheerfully, however, a smile on his face.

"Alex!" Jenna jogged the rest of the way to him, ignoring Isaac's guards, who looked very unsure as to what they were supposed to do. She kneeled in front of him, checking for a wound. "Alex, what happened?"

"I got hit by an arrow, no big deal," Alex shrugged. He sighed at Jenna's panicked look and fresh bout of tears.

"Jenna," he took her hands in his own. "I'm fine. I'm a Mercury Adept, remember?"

"B-but you could have died and and" she buried her face into the shoulder that wasn't splattered with blood and started sobbing. Alex looked a bit surprised, then carefully encircled his arms around her back.

"I'm alright, I'm alright," he said soothingly. "Don't worry about me."

"Garet, Ivan!" Mia ignored Alex and Jenna, and addressed the other two Adepts. "Are you two alright?"

"We're fine," Gareth answered for both of them, accepting her hand up. "A good night's sleep would make both of us feel better, but as of now, we're fine."

"I'm glad to hear it," Mia smiled. "How's Isaac?"

"He hasn't woken up yet," Ivan answered her this time, and she helped him gain his feet. "His breathing and pulse rate are regular, he just needs some more rest."

The first thing he was aware of was the warm sunlight on his face.

The second thing was a pounding head ache.

Isaac opened his eyes slowly, staring up at the mottled blue and white dome of the sky for several minutes, or hours, he

couldn't really tell. Somewhere above him a bird was singing, the song blending with the whisper of the wind through the trees.

It's so peaceful, he closed his eyes again, breathing in the rich, earthy scent of the grass beneath him. *All I want all I've ever wanted.*

His thoughts were cut short by a hint of smoke in the air, and the muttering of soft voices. Isaac sat up.

And couldn't believe what he was seeing for a moment.

The entire back half of the school was a charred ruin. The porch he had played on as a child was now a pile of rubble. The back wall was burned, a gaping hole where the door used to be. The nearby trees were badly scorched and singed, and the moving stone that was still standing where he remembered it to have been was blackened and cracked. A couple of yards away the other Adepts were conversing quietly with his guards, one of which had a very badly burn cloak. Three of the Adepts he didn't know.

"Master Isaac!" one of the guards, he had never bothered to learn their names, noticed his movements. The others turned as one.

Trying not to curse, Isaac managed to push himself to his feet. Trying to keep his head from spinning, he walked over to where they were standing.

"Still wanna try to recruit us?" Gareth asked, grinning obnoxiously.

"Shut up," he growled.

"War is an evil thing," Ivan stated softly. Ivan noticed that he looked rather pale. "No one should be forced to take place in one."

"Uh huh, this coming from the guy that enjoys hurting anyone weaker," Gareth gave Ivan a disbelieving look.

"And tortures small, furry animals," one of the newer Adepts, a boy maybe a year or two older than him, added. Isaac decided right away that he liked him.

"I do NOT," Ivan gave the blue haired boy a look that could

have melted solid steel. "And I admit, I was a little brat, but I NEVER hurt ANYONE."

"Just psychologically damaged us," another of the new Adepts, an older boy with long brown hair pointed out.

"Admit it, Ivan, you're a sadistic, evil brat and you know it."

Isaac made note that the list of people he liked was growing.

"I'm not sadistic!" Ivan protested.

"Oh, but you admit that your evil," Gareth smirked.

"Garet!"

"Hey, we're just kidding," Gareth clapped the younger boy on the shoulder. "We needed SOMEONE to make our lives miserable."

"And our lives were SO happy to begin with, right?" the brown haired girl rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, they were pretty good," Isaac said, quietly. Everyone was silent for a moment.

"I'm Jenna," the brown haired girl broke the silence, introducing herself. "This is my brother, Felix."

The brown haired boy nodded.

"And I'm Alex," the blue haired boy grinned, holding out one hand. Isaac shook it, allowing himself a small smile. "Nice ta meet ya, Isaac."

"You freak, his guards almost killed you," Mia glared at him.

"Anyone could have made that mistake," Alex waved it off.

"Oh, you were the boy in the tree," Isaac noted the dried blood spattering Alex's tunic and vest. "I apologize."

"Don't worry about it. I'm a Mercury Adept. What's the point if I don't heal something every once in a while?" Alex asked.

"Alex, the point of Mercury Adepts IS to heal, but we like to avoid it when we can-" Mia began.

"Because if we're healing it means that someone had to suffer before we could," Alex finished for her, rehearsing the lecture as if he had heard the same thing over and over.

"We should go inside," Mia ignored him. "Ivan and Gareth are tired, and I'm sure Isaac feels the same way."

Isaac nodded, the headache had only gotten worse the longer he stood up, and all he could really concentrate on was the hope of a nice, soft bed. He numbly followed Mia into the remains of the school, not even looking back to see if anyone else followed.

"What's up, Felix?" Jenna asked, looking at her brother with concern.

Felix didn't look at her. He seemed to be surveying the damage of the porch. "Alex, do you think you could wash the wood off?"

"No problem," Alex grinned. He put his hands together, and a faint blue light surrounded them. When he separated them, a sphere of water had gathered between them, connected to his finger tips by thin strings of arctic Psynergy.

He coaxed it, using the orb of aqua in his hands to direct a larger force. The flood washed away the roof, and destroyed anything that couldn't be removed. Alex, pale and shaking visibly despite the warm summer air, let the sphere drop. It splashed into a small puddle on the grass, glittering in the sun.

Felix had to throw out an arm to keep Alex from following the sphere.

"I-I'm alright," Alex protested, looking up at him. Felix nearly let him fall. He was as white as a sheet, and his eyes were a pale, ice blue.

"I'm sorry, Alex," he whispered. "I shouldn't have-"

"N-no, I-I'm fine," the Mercury Adept repeated, obviously lying. "I-I'm just so cold."

"Jenna, help him inside," Felix ordered her. Jenna nodded and took Alex's weight on herself. She hooked one arm around his back, supporting him completely, and began walking slowly to the front of the school. "I can do the rest

from here."

"Whatever you say, Felix," Jenna whispered.

Felix waited until they were gone before he went to work.

With the wave of one hand, and a brief flare of Psynergy, he made the wood come back to life. It healed itself, the supports rooting into the ground. The wall rippled, becoming ridged and scarred looking, but whole. The trunks of slender trees rose up at even intervals around the porch, their branches bursting from their tops and creating an intertwined canopy of leaves and boughs for a roof. As a final touch, Felix dropped a curtain of ivy over the doorway. Remembering his sister's love for flowers, he allowed a few deep purple stars to bloom.

Satisfied, Felix climbed onto the porch, pulled aside the draping ivy, and walked inside.

Isaac woke up in a room he recognized all too well.

My old room, he smiled sleepily. He had been too eager to have his face hit the pillow to notice ANYTHING the night before. He sat up, holding the soft cotton sheets in his hands, looking around at the honey colored tones of the wooden interior, lit up by the light through the window.

Nothing's changed, he marveled. *Everything's exactly the same but.*

He looked down to his left wrist. Nothing was there but a tan line.

I didn't lose it, did I?

He looked frantically, and found the object he was searching for right on the nightstand next to his bed.

It was a bracelet. A ring of thick gold, with inscriptions of an ancient tongue etched all along the outside. It was his only sign of his rank, of his role in the army. Without it, he was simply another student in the school. He unclasped it and

secured it on his left wrist, not wanting to let it out of his sight.

"Never lose it, Isaac," Feh had warned him. "Without it you're no one."

That done, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up, blinking owlishly. After a moment's hesitation, he crossed the room and kneeled in front of his bureau and pulled out one of the drawers.

His old clothes, untouched and unfaded, were all folded neatly within the drawer's confines.

Isaac's eyes began to sting as he opened each drawer. Not a sock had been removed, not a bauble hidden amidst the folds disturbed.

The tears that had been gathering at the corners of his eyes were released when he opened the top drawer.

There, atop clothing that had fit him at the age of eight, was a vest that would fit him now. Leaves were embroidered along the green trim in gold, the thick brown cloth of the vest was of the highest quality.

"So I was missed, after all," he whispered, drying his tears with the sleeve of the pajamas Felix had borrowed him.

When he did so, the bracelet brushed against his cheek, cold and hard, almost as a reminder.

"Isaac?" Mia's voice came from the other side of the door, followed by a tentative knock. "Can I come in?"

He closed the drawer and moved back towards his bed.

"Yeah, go ahead."

The Mercury Adept entered the room, fully dressed, ad bundle of cloth under her arm and a pair of boots in one hand. "Oh, good, Felix's pajamas DID fit you."

"More or less," Isaac shrugged.

"Well, these aren't as nice as your uniform, but you need something," she handed him the bundle, which turned out to be an old tunic and pair of breeches that had apparently at one time belonged to Felix. "And these are Garet's old boots. They should fit."

She waited patiently while Isaac sat on the bed and pulled on the boots. "Perfect."

"I know they're kind of scuffed and worn," she apologized quickly.

"But they're broken in and incredibly comfortable," he smiled. "I always liked hand-me-downs better than new clothes."

"Alright," Mia looked significantly happier than he had seen her so far. "I'll let you get dressed."

Isaac was very quick to do so the moment she closed the door. The old training clothes felt soft against his skin after wearing starched and pressed uniforms for so long. His gaze strayed to the vest as he knotted his belt. *Who would put that much work into something like this for ME of all people? No one has EVER done something like this for me.*

He picked up the vest, holding it out in front of him. The sunlight from the window reflected off of the gold, causing the leaves to shimmer.

Who? he wondered, slipping into the vest. *And why?* Deciding not to worry about it, he tugged on Garet's old boots, and left the room.

Mia was waiting for him. She gasped when she saw him. "You found it!"

"Wha-?"

She took the two remaining steps between them, holding the loose ends of the vest with her fingers. "This vest Hama, Jenna and I made it in case you ever came back."

"I found it in my drawer," Isaac took a step back. "Th-thank you."

"It's almost like you never left."

Isaac stiffened. *All I want all I've ever wanted.*

"Isaac?" Mia put one hand on his arm. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he grinned weakly, trying to keep the fact that he was shaking out of his voice. "I was thinking about what I'm going to do next. The general of the Angoran Armies can't stay in a school for forever."

"Th-then I suppose you'll have to leave," Mia said softly, sounding as if she was close to crying.

All I want, all I've ever wanted.

"No," he loosened the bracelet, the one token that named him leader of the Angoran Armies. "Don't lose it, Isaac," Feh's words echoed in his mind, but he ignored them. The gold band clattered on the floor.

Is peace.

"Master Hama?"

Hama stood and turned. The violet haired girl standing in the temple's entrance caused her to smile. "Feizhi, what are you doing here?"

"My father is coming," Feizhi explained. "I wanted to warn you."

"I already knew he was coming," Hama sighed. "The reason, however, has not been revealed to me yet."

"Isaac disappeared," Feizhi lowered he head. "My father thinks you had something to do with it."

"Then it was in the area of the school," Hama whispered.

"Thank you, Feizhi, will you come with me? I must go back." The girl nodded her head in agreement.

"But Master Isaac-"

Isaac held up one hand, and his guard's-no, Nathan's-protests fell silent. "That's not who I am anymore."

"But Isaac this will not help Angora," Nathan told him. They were standing on the steps that lead to the front door of the school, and Isaac had just broken the news that he wished to remain at the school.

"You'd be surprised," Isaac held out his one symbol of power. Nathan took it, looking dumbfounded. "Give it to someone

who wants it. It's rather pretty, Feizhi might like it."

"Isaac-"

"No," he shook his head. "I just want to live my life in peace right here. Is that too much to ask?"

Nathan put one hand on his shoulder. "Are you sure this is what you want to do? There's no turning back from this decision."

"I'm sure," Isaac said, and he meant it. "Coming here helped me remember who I am, helped me remember that I'm not someone who only knows war and bloodshed."

Nathan gave him an appraising look. "What should I tell Master Feh?"

"I don't care," Isaac shook his head. "I'm through."

"Then I guess this is goodbye," Nathan grinned, signaling to his three companions, who had been saddling the horses in the front yard. They mounted their own horses and trotted up, leading the fourth. "I hope you are satisfied with where this life takes you."

"Oh, believe me, I will," Isaac returned the grin. Nathan mounted his horse. "Take care of yourself, Nathan and thank you."

"Goodbye, Isaac."

With the wave of one hand, Nathan wheeled his horse around and cantered down the path. The other guards yelled goodbyes over their shoulders before they disappeared among the trees.

"You really think this is the right choice?" Ivan asked him from the doorway.

Isaac turned to him. "I know it is."

Only later did he find out that all four guards were executed for his desertion.

***Chapter 5*: Chapter 4**

Chapter 4

"Hey, Alex," Jenna greeted the Mercury Adept gently, sitting in the chair next to his bed. "How are you feeling?"

Alex opened one eye, which was slowly returning to its normal shade of dark blue, and smiled. "I'm feeling better. I'm just tired."

"That's understandable," she nodded, biting her lip. She would never admit it, but she was desperately worried about him.

He opened both eyes this time. "Don't worry about me, Jen. I'm going to be fine."

"It might have been the arrow," Jenna went pink. "I'll talk to Isaac."

"Thanks," he smiled again and closed his eyes. He was clearly exhausted from their short conversation, and that alarmed her.

"Get some rest, alright?" she brushed one hand through his hair. He stiffened at the almost motherly action.

"Alright," he mumbled after a moment, and she stood and slipped out into the hall.

"Hey, Jenna," Gareth was walking down the hall. "How's Alex?"

"H-he's getting better," she responded, trying not to cry. Alex WASN'T getting any better. If anything, he was getting worse.

"Oh, that's good," Gareth either didn't notice the shakiness of her statement, or decided not to comment on it. She was pretty sure it was the latter. Most people thought Gareth was a big, dumb, oaf, and half the time that was completely true. However, she had known him long enough to realize he was in truth very perceptive. He put a gentle hand on her

shoulder. "Don't worry, Jenna. He's going to be alright."
She felt a rush of gratitude towards the Mars Adept. "Thanks, Gareth. I was just going to talk to Isaac about the arrow that hit him."

"Good thinking," he grinned at her, his fiery brown eyes soft for a moment. "We'll help him."

"I don't know anything about the weapons," Isaac said for the fourth time. "I was only trained to use them."

They had all gathered in Ivan's room. Mia, Gareth, and Jenna were sitting on the bed, Felix was sitting with his back up against it, and Ivan was sitting on the floor across from Isaac.

"Are you sure?" the Jupiter Adept pressed him, again. "Did Feh have you do something with Psynergy? Something that seemed perfectly normal?"

"Well," Isaac frowned. "He DID have me straiten out the wood with my Psynergy, but other than that, nothing."

"Hmmm," Ivan frowned himself. "That wouldn't do any serious damage to Alex. Could I read your mind? I might be able to find something."

"Uh," Isaac was a bit taken aback, then nodded. "Okay."
Ivan closed his eyes, and concentrated on the Venus Adept's memories.

He was pulled into a vortex of swirling color, mostly green and gold, with a hint of blue, red, and purple. The colors solidified, then came into sharp focus. He was standing in a clearing, surrounded by ancient trees. Feh was sitting on a smooth, old rock near the center, and a twelve-year-old Isaac was sitting on the ground next to him, eyes closed and a small smile on his face. Feh was speaking, but it had faded out into a soft hum, merely a background noise. Ivan could hear only what Isaac did, and this younger Isaac had decided to tune his mentor out.

To listen to the trees. They were singing to him, of the

strength that ran through their limbs, of their roots searching deep into the earth. They sang of life and growing, of death and wilting. Each season had a song, and he knew each one, his heart singing along. The Earth beneath him hummed softly in the background, an ever solid presence, the grass around him sang, and even the rock beside him let out a slow, resonating hum. It was wonderful, intoxicating, filling him with strength and life.

"You're doing it again, aren't you," Feh snapped, his voice causing Isaac's voice in the intricate web of life to falter. A sharp kick between his shoulder blades caused his song to die. "I should burn this forest down."

"I won't do it anymore," Isaac said softly, only his eyes betraying his pain. "I promise, I won't."

The scene faded slowly into another time, another forest. The trees were younger, their songs fainter. Isaac, at fourteen, was standing among them, arms outstretched, his head thrown back to greet the sun, eyes closed. This time the song was out loud, the words foreign, but strangely familiar.

Everything was slowly becoming clear to Ivan, who had seen Felix do much of the same thing in the woods when he thought no one was around.

We all became Adepts when we were very young. Our training SHOULD have started when we were much older and now and now we're...

He was being pulled back by a familiar force. He allowed it to happen, and soon opened his eyes. He was not longer in the sun dappled clearing, he was in a room, with Hama kneeling at his side.

"What did you find out?" she asked softly.

"Hama, we're-"

"I know," she cut him off. "I realized my mistake years ago."

"Huh?" Isaac, who looked as if he had just been experiencing

a pleasant memory, gave them both a blank stare.

Hama smiled gently at him. "I'm glad you remember who you are, Isaac."

"It was more of a realization of who I was," Isaac admitted. "I like the vest, by the way."

"You're welcome," she nodded her head. Ivan could sense that she was fighting the impulse to hug him. Probably better to hold back, Isaac would ram a dagger into her ribs before he realized she wasn't attacking him. Not out of cold heartedness, it was just how he had been taught. "Now, I'll explain myself. The Adepts here stated their training far too young. The Elements you control have become a part of you. Haven't you ever noticed that you have the ability to use Psynergy in ways that no other Adept has ever, or ever will be able to? All other Adepts have set spells that they use, but the students here can use those spells, and far more."

"So we're creative Adepts."

They turned towards the door. Alex was leaning against the frame, breathing heavily, exhaustion plain on his face.

"Alex, you shouldn't be up!" Jenna scolded him.

"Well, I had a feeling that something important was going on," Alex shrugged. "And I was right."

Felix jumped to his feet and lead the Mercury Adept over to the bed. Alex refused to lie down, even when Mia, Garet, and Jenna sat on the floor. He sat on the mattress, his back against the wall, his eyes closed.

"Not just creative," Hama shook her head. "Your Psynergy is tied with your very lives. I've told you many times that the four elements of Alchemy make up everything, even us. What I didn't tell you is that if one element becomes dominant, it causes alteration in that being."

"Meaning that we aren't exactly human anymore," Ivan explained. Isaac looked at him incredulously. "So you're saying I'm a tree."

"Does this make me a pond?" Alex asked, cracking one eye open.

"I'm a rock!" Felix voted. "And you're a bonfire, Jenna!"
"At least you all have a good sense of humor," Hama smiled.
"So, when Alex lost a lot of blood and then used a lot of
Psynergy," Mia began.

"He almost killed himself, and he might be a while in
recovering," Hama finished for her.

"Don't you love how they talk about you like you're not
there?" Alex asked, and the other Adepts laughed.

"Sorry, Alex, you're just not important anymore," Felix
grinned up at his best friend. "You're a dried up pond."

"So, can we help him?" Jenna asked, ignoring her brother.

"I don't know," Hama admitted. "You will have to find that
out for yourselves. And I leave you to it."

She stood, and left the room before further discussion.

They talked well into the night, long after Alex finally fell
asleep. Their discussion always led back to the same thing:
their Psynergy.

"When I was little, I had to focus completely when I used
Psynergy," Isaac admitted. "Now, I barely even have to think
about what I'm doing sometimes it's like the Psynergy is
controlling me."

"I know what you mean," Gareth nodded furiously.

"So, we just need to put OUR Psynergy into Alex?" Felix
asked.

"That's the idea," Ivan said thoughtfully. "It should work, but
I'm not positive. One of us should try it, and see what
happens. I could give it a shot-"

"I'll do it," Mia volunteered, her words so quiet they were
almost inaudible.

"No," Gareth shook his head. "We don't know what will
happen, it's FAR too risky. And besides, Ivan is the most
powerful Adept here-"

"But both Alex and I are Mercury Adepts," Mia argued. "And
my Psynergy is suited to this kind of thing, I think it will

work best if I do it."

"But-"

"I'm obviously the best one here for this," Mia wouldn't even let him argue the point.

"I hate to say it, but she's right," Isaac added to Mia's statement.

"Oh, sure let's just all take Mia's side, shall we?" Gareth ran his fingers through his spiky hair, obviously very reluctant to let Mia do ANYTHING that would endanger her safety. He sighed heavily, and looked at Mia hard, as if sizing her up.

"Alright just be careful."

Mia nodded and smiled gently before kneeling at Alex's bedside. She closed her eyes, holding one hand over his forehead, and the other over the spot where the arrow had hit him. Orbs of pale, icy blue light formed in her palms. Lines of energy flowed like her watery element, spreading into pools of glowing azure over the two spots that Mia had indicated on Alex.

After a moment, the luminescence faded and Mia opened her eyes. Some of the color had returned to Alex's skin, and he seemed to be breathing easier. Mia opened her eyes. "I think that might help. I can't be sure until he wakes up."

"He IS less pale," Jenna pointed out.

Mia stood, and nearly collapsed. Gareth was ready. He caught her as she fell, scooping her up so he could carry her.

"No, I'm fine," she muttered, pushing against him. "I'm fine!"

"No you're not," Gareth merely held tighter. "Just let me help you, Mia."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide, then settled into his arms. "Alright."

"Let's get you to bed," he said softly, turning and leaving Ivan's room.

"Bed sounds like a good idea," Isaac stood and stretched, sore from sitting on a hardwood floor for several hours. The other Adepts, with the exception of Ivan, followed his example, exchanging their good nights and filing out of

Ivan's room.

It wasn't long before the Jupiter Adept was the only one still within the room.

"Well, I'll just steal Alex's bed, shall I?" he said to no one in particular.

"I want him back," Feh ordered, eyes smoldering. "If he thinks that he can send four dogs back with his symbol of power to free himself from this position, he's far wrong."

"Does the price of freedom have to be so high?" a blue haired man lounging in one of Feh's arm chairs asked.

"You should know, Picard," Feh reminded him. "I freed you from that dungeon, Lemurian. You remember that. You were left to die-"

"-And I owe you my life, I know," Picard stood, his golden eyes flashing.

Feh subconsciously made a ward against evil with one hand, caught himself, and dropped the hand. "Picard, I have a mission that will buy you your freedom."

Picard said nothing to this, but Feh could see the desperation in his eyes. Lemurians were very serious about life debts, and Picard would do anything to free himself of this one. Something Feh was well aware of, and used to his advantage.

"Bring Isaac back," Feh ordered. "Hurt him if it is necessary, and kill everyone at the school, it will make both of our lives easier."

Picard flinched, then sat back down, an unreadable expression forming a mask over his true nature. "It's far too risky. There are eight Adepts in that school, all of which are extremely powerful. I'm only one Lemurian, Feh."

"What about a Lemurian and an Adept?" Feh asked. "Sheba, come out."

A young blonde girl with cool, green eyes entered the room. She regarded Picard as if he was a pack horse, before

nodding slowly.

"Isn't she from Gondowan?" Picard asked.

"Gondowan betrayed me," she answered for Feh, ice and contempt lacing through her words. "Merely because I'm an Adept."

"Sheba is a Jupiter Adept," Feh explained. "She was training to become a member of Gondowan's armies, but they became afraid. Sheba's ability to use Psynergy marked her as an Adept from Angora, and they believed she would betray them. They left her for dead in the desert."

"I want revenge," she said, eyes gleaming malevolently. "On every citizen of Gondowan."

"This is the first step to what we both want," Picard's eyes seemed to glow in the flickering light of the fire in the grate.

"We leave tonight."

"I like him," Sheba smiled, but her eyes never lost their cold, hard quality. "Yes, we leave tonight."

Ha ha! This is all becaus of Midnight C, so blame her, not me! And this chapter isn't too bad...just wait for Chapter 5!

^_^ Isaac: O_o;;;

And you can't flame me, 'cause all flames will be extinguished by Mia and worse flames will be sent back by Garet. I guess I should say the flames will be extinguished by whoever is currently available, Mia, Alex, or Picard, and be sent back with worst flames 'specially made by Garet, Jenna, Satty-kun, and Mena-chan.

Satty-kun: Why do you call us that?

'Cause it's fun. Oh, just so you know, I am not continueing "Ivan's New Groove" 'cause it's stupid...unless, of course, I get LOTS of nice reviews! ^_^

Isaac: ::holds up sign that says "ha ha, yeah right"::

Quiet you. Alright, I'm going to shut up now! ^_^;;; R&R or you'll never, ever get more fics from me!

Isaac: ::holds up sign that says "Review! She means it!"::

***Chapter 6*: Chapter 5**

Chapter 5

br

Alex opened his eyes.

Br

He was lying in a bed. Not his own, but that hardly mattered. He was entirely content to simply lie there, contemplating the

criss-cross pattern the beams created on the ceiling, and the warmth of

the covers. Unfortunately, his contemplation was cut short by a great

deal of noise in the hall.

br

Muttering softly to himself he got up, trying to ignore how cold

the wooden floor was against the soles of his bare feet. He stalked to

the door, threw it open, and almost started to laugh.

br

Garet and Isaac were sprawled across the floor. The former had

one knee pressing into the back of the latter, holding his arms up behind

his head. It took Alex a minute to realize that Isaac was saying

something.

br

"Get off of my back!" he struggled, to no avail. "Ow! That HURTS!"

Br

"Do you yield?" Garet asked, calmly.

Br

"OW! Yes! I give up!"Br

br

Garet stood, releasing Isaac. The Venus Adept lay on the ground

for a moment longer before sitting up.Br

Br

"What was that all about?" Alex asked. Br

Br

They both jumped and looked at him.Br

br

"You're alive," Isaac grinned. Br

Br

"Ivan'll be happy to get his bed back," Garet added.Br

Br

"What?" Br

Br

"You've been sleeping in there for three days," Isaac explained,

getting to his feet. Garet was quick to follow. "Mia did the best she

could, but I guess you had to recover some of your Psynergy naturally."Br

Br

"Oh," Alex didn't understand what they were talking about in

full, but "sleeping in there for three days" pretty much summed up what

he wanted to know. "So, what was that about?"br

br

"Oh, we were just being stupid," Garet shrugged.br

Br

"So, if Garet won, does that mean that Isaac is the stupid one?" Br

br

"No," Isaac glared at him. "It means that Garet has been crowned

the King of Stupidity."Br

Br

"You're both stupid," Mia walked up to them. She went directly to Alex, putting the inside of her wrist to his forehead. "Well, your

temperature is normal. How are you feeling?"Br

Br

"Like I slept for a week," Alex stretched. "I feel GOOD."Br

br

"You should," Mia checked his pulse. "That was a complete healing. Most of your Psynergy has been replaced."Br

Br

"Yay, Alex is alright," Isaac cheered sarcastically. "Let's all be happy. Well, actually, you'll have to be happy for me. I was

supposed to talk to Feizhi about an hour ago."br

br

"Feizhi?" Alex gave him a blank look.br

br

"I'll explain later," Isaac promised.Br

Br

*****Br

br

"Isaac," Feizhi scrambled to her feet. She had been sitting out

on the recently repaired porch, enjoying the breeze. "I'm sorry to

bother you-"br

br

"Sorry I'm late," he sat down next to her feet. "Well? Take a seat."br

Br

She gave him an odd look. "Alright," she sat down next to him.

"How are you?"Br

br

"I'm okay," he shrugged. "So, you wanted to talk to me?"Br

Br

"My father isn't just going to let you go, you know," she

dropped

her gaze and began fingering the material of her skirt. "He's

recruited

some new Adepts, what he'll do with them I can only guess.

And your

guards he had them executed."Br

Br

It hit him like an electric shock. "Wh-what?!"Br

br

"I should have told you earlier, but I thought you'd be mad,"

she

admitted. "I left before I could find out all of his plans, but

that IS

what I know."Br

br

"It's alright," he ran one shaky hand through his disorderly hair, still feeling numb with shock. Nathan he had talked to him just a

few days ago. "Thanks you, Feizhi."Br

br

Her head snapped up and she started at him with amazement.

"Y-you're not mad?"br

Br

"Of course not," he said softly, looking up into the trees.

"Why

would I be mad? So, are you going back?"Br

br

"Y-yes," she nodded. "Father is probably already wondering where

I am."Br

Br

"Good luck," he looked at her and smiled. She surprised him by throwing her arms around his neck. He only just restrained himself from hitting her. And when he was done fighting instinct, he stiffened. The last hug he had received was nine years ago, and now he felt more than a little awkward in Feizhi's embrace. After a moment he slowly reached up and returned the hug, holding her shoulders gently.Br

br
He was almost reluctant to let her go.BR

br
"I'll be back soon," she promised when they separated, her eyes soft.br

BR

"Be careful."br
br

"I will."Br
br

*****br
br

Feizhi settled into the seat of the carriage. If she was right, her father had already sent out Adepts to take Isaac back, which meant that she had to hurry home.br

Br

Isaac she couldn't help it, her train of thought immediately went to the Venus Adept, absent mindedly listening to the creak of the carriage wheels. **He's changed so much *who would have thought*bR
br

The carriage had just passed through the Lamakan Desert,
and Hsu
was going to take them through Altin to water the horses.
They would be
there shortly shortly.Br

Br

Her eyes snapped open when the carriage lurched
sideways.Br

br

She fell forward off of her seat, cracking her head against
the
edge of the seat across from her. Stars burst across her
vision, and she
fought to remain conscious. The carriage had begun swaying
wildly, and
she just managed to hold onto one of the seats. She could
dimly hear
Hsu's shouts, the horses squeals of terror, and the rumbling
of the cart
wheels.Br

Br

That was when they hit the rock. All of the windows
shattered
simultaneously, showering the inside of the carriage with
broken glass
and splintered wood. She cowered in-between the two seats,
trying to
protect herself from the rain of shards.Br

Br

When it was all over she slowly opened her eyes, blinking
away
blood that was running into her eyes. She was bleeding, and
she was sore
all over, but she was alive. She was ALIVE.Br

Br

"Ah, Feizhi," a voice that sent chills up her spine stated her

name. She looked up, a man with blue hair was standing in the doorway.

She recognized him as Picard, the Lemurian.br

br

"She could be useful," another voice, higher and feminine noted

coldly.br

Br

"Yes, she could," Picard reached in and pulled her out by her arm. She ended up on he knees, cringing against the sudden light. "And

I believe that Feh will be VERY pleased that we found her.Br

br

*****Br

Br

Feizhi left yesterday, Isaac mused, closing his eyes against the sun. He was sprawled out in the middle of the lawn, looking up into

the sky. Not very dignified for a General, but that wasn't who he was

anymore. He wasn't even annoyed when a shadow blocked his sunlight.Br

br

"Isaac."Br

Br

The Venus Adept opened his eyes. Instead of a cloud shading his

eyes, it was Ivan, looking deadly serious.Br

br

"hello, Ivan," he said, sounding calm despite the fact that Ivan

looked like he was about to announce that someone had died.br

Br

"I have bad new, I'm afraid," Ivan informed him.br

Br

"Oh, did Mia and Garet have an argument?" Isaac sat up, shaking loose grass from his hair and turning back to the Jupiter Adept.br

br
Ivan didn't even smile. "I mean it, Isaac. I have a feeling that something is going to happen, something worse than any of could ever imagine. And Hama's locked herself in her room. She hasn't been out for two days, and won't answer when we knock."br

Br
"Did you try to contact her?" Isaac bit his lip.br

Br
"Of course, as soon as I realized that she hadn't been getting her meals in the kitchen," Ivan replied. "She's definitely THERE. At

least, physically, but-"br

Br
"C'mon," Isaac stood.Br

Br
One of Ivan's eyebrow's rose. "Where exactly are we going?"Br

Br
"To knock down the door," Isaac said as if it was something he did routinely. Maybe it was. "If Hama's not all there mentally we need

to know how and why, now don't we. I just figure that it will be easier

to find that out if you're in the same room as her."Br

Br
"I suppose so," Ivan stood himself. "Well, let's go."Br

br
*****Br

Br

They quickly enlisted Gareth's help. Ivan half expected him to destroy the door completely, instead the Fire Master simply melted the hinges and kicked the wood in.Br

Br

Hama's room was like a tomb. The air was musty, and everything was coated with the thinnest layer of dust. Everything aside from their breathing was eerily silent.br

Br

Hama herself was lying face up on the floor, her violet kimono spreading around her. Her eyes were wide open, and she was still as death.Br

br

"Aunt Hama!" Ivan kneeled at her side, taking her hand in his.

Her skin was cold and deathly pale, but a faint pulse fluttered under his touch.Br

br

"I-is she?" Gareth began the question, but couldn't finish it.Br

Br

"No," Ivan shook his head, his own relief flooding through him.

"She's still alive."Br

bR

Isaac kneeled next to him. "What happened to her?"br

Br

"I'll find out," Ivan closed his eyes. Again, he was outside of himself, even if he was still aware of every intake of breath and every beat of his heart. He moved to Hama, the world fading into mist.Br

Br

"What do you want?" Hama's voice was saying. Icy green eyes came into sharp focus amid the grey, followed by the face of a young girl framed by short, blonde hair.br

br

"What I want should be of no concern to you," she said, her voice sending waves of cold to the core of Ivan's very being.br

br

"I won't let you take Isaac," Hama's voice seemed to echo all around him.Br

Br

"There's nothing you can do to stop me."br

Br

Hama cried out in pain, then fell silent. The grey around him darkened to black, and he was forced back into himself.Br

Br

His eyes snapped open and Hama's room swam in and out of focus in front of him. He couldn't breathe, could hardly think, some outside force crushing the life out of him. The world tilted forward, then stopped.Br

Br

"Ivan? Ivan, what's wrong?" Isaac's voice came as if from far away. "IVAN!"br

Br

It was enough, Ivan began to fight back. With a flash of violet light, he was back in the sea of darkness.br

br

"Impressive," the girl's cold voice, holding a hint of amusement,

sounded through the emptiness. "You could prove to be a challenge."br

br

"Who are you?" he asked. "What do you want?"Br

br

"I am Sheba, and I want you to die."Br

Br

Ivan was back again, but this time in full control. The first gasp for breath ended in a fit of coughing, but the second was the breath

of life.Br

br

He was being supported by Isaac, who had started babbling.

"Ivan! You're alive! We thought you were dead for sure! I

mean, when

you stopped breathing and your eyes rolled back in your head and-"br

br

"Calm down, Isaac," Garet, who was kneeling on the other side of

Ivan, admonished him quietly.br

br

"Do you know anyone named 'Sheba'?" Ivan asked.

Isaac shook his head. "No."br

Br

"I think we're going to have a problem," he admitted.Br

br

*****Br

Br

Mia was passing the door when someone knocked. She hesitated for

a moment, the last person to knock on this door had been from the army.

It had been Isaac, but he had been after their blood. After a moment,

she reached for the handle.Br

Br

And quickly jerked back when she sensed Psynergy, and an aura of

icy air surrounded the knob. Someone on the other side kicked the frozen

wood, causing it to shatter.br

br

Both of the people standing on their doorstep were obviously

powerful Adepts. The man had Feizhi in a sleeper, and the girl.br

br

The girl dashed forward with inhuman speed, tackling Mai t the

ground. Before the Mercury Adept could do a thing, she had been flipped

onto her stomach, the girl's knee digging inbetween her shoulder blades

and the cold flat of a knife blade was being pressed into the side of her

neck.br

Br

"Now, girly," the girl said, her tone soft and dangerous.

"Scream."

***Chapter 7*: Chapter 6**

Alex: Hey it's me again. Yep my computer still hates me.

::kicking computer:: darn stupid machine, messy HTML code.Br

br

Chapter 6br

Br

Ivan didn't bother to explain himself, simply got to his feet and

ran out into the hall, ignoring the questions Isaac and Garet were

yelling behind him.br

br

If only the front door wasn't so far away he thought desperately. He sent out a line of Psynergy before him, the faint light

forming into a bird and taking flight, the violet wings barely visible.

He had a double image in front of him, his own, and the bird's. It flew

around several sharp corners and down a staircase before coming to the

front door. Sheba was there, pinning Mia down, the thin blade in her

hand pressed against the Mercury Adept's jugular vein. The vision

shifted to the broken doorway, where a man Ivan didn't know was holding

Feizhi. The name "Picard" came instantly to his mind, along with the

word "Lemuria".Br

br

*Lemuria? What is he DOING? If he's a Lemurian...*Br

Br

He tried to recall the line of Psynergy, but Sheba had already caged his "bird". Before he could banish it completely, she had sent a

burst of power down the line connecting them. Pain flooded Ivan's

senses, driving him to his knees. The double vision collided, becoming a

blur of shapes before him.Br

Br

"It goes both ways," he said, aloud and mentally, sending his own

charge down the line. Sheba's scream ripped at his mind, her pain

becoming his. He slowly gained his feet, his eyesight still effected by

the spell. He tried again to recall it, but nothing happened.

He began

a slow, hesitant walk down the hall, not sure what was there, and what

wasn't.br

br

Garet! he called to his friend. *They're at the front door!

It's Mia! She's-*Br

br

Another hit from Sheba's mind. He staggered before hitting

a

wall he couldn't see, and sliding to the ground, unable to respond the

attack.Br

br

*****Br

br

Garet barely paused after Ivan ran out of Hama's room.

Hama had

always been a collector of all kinds of weapons, and the battle axe he chose now felt comfortable in his grip. He was barely aware of Isaac grabbing a long broadsword and following him as he charged out of the room.Br

Br

Garet! They're at the front door! Ivan's voice sounded in his mind. He was used to Ivan talking to him like this, but he had never sounded so desperate, so quiet *It's Mia! She's-*Br

Br

His voice cut out abruptly.br

Br

*She's what? Ivan? IVAN!*br

br

Garet gave up. Ivan's "presence" in his mind was gone. "This is not good. If Mia's hurt I swear, I'll kill them."Br

Br

"What?" Isaac asked.br

br

Garet didn't bother to answer. He ran down the hall, his booted feet barely whispering against the wooden floor. Despite his girth he could be silent when he wanted to be, and this was one of those times.

He ignored Ivan's prone form, slumped against the wall, completely intent on his purpose, barely noticing the red hazing his vision.Br

Br

A fire had begun burning at the back of his mind from the moment

he had seen Hama lying on the floor. Now it grew, burning
away all
through and reason. And he let it, let it take him closer to
the element
he controlled than ever before.br

Br

*****Br

Br

"Ivan!"br

Isaac knelt next to his fallen friend, grabbing his
shoulders
and shaking him. Ivan's eyes opened slowly. He looked
around, seeming
disoriented for a moment, before he seemed to realize where
he was. br

"Isaac! Where? What? We have to-"Br

br

"Take it easy," Isaac ordered him. "Looks like you've had a
rough time. What happened? What's going on?"br

Br

"Two Adepts are here," Ivan explained. "I'm not sure what
their
true objective is, but I do know that they want to take you
back."

Br

"There's no way that's happening."Br

Br

"They're going to use Feizhi and Mia to bargain for you," the
Jupiter Adept tried to stand, but failed miserably. "And
Sheba she's a

Jupiter Adept, she did that to Hama, and-"Br

Br

"Garet," sudden realization flooded through Isaac. "Stay
here,

Ivan. I need to hurry."Br

br

He ran down the hall, praying with all of his might to any deity

that would listen that he wasn't too late.Br

Br

But he knew, deep down, that he already was.Br

Br

*****Br

Br

Mia didn't scream when the blade slid between her ribs, or when

Sheba tugged it from her. It was only much later in her nightmares that

she did. Falling had never felt so desperate, or so abrupt, when she

stopped at her knees it was as if the world had stopped. Br

Br

"Don't heal yourself," Sheba touched the bloody tip of her sword

to her throat. "You still have a chance to survive if Isaac comes

quietly, but if you try now you'll die."br

Br

Heal yourself, a quiet voice told her through the pain that riddled her mind. *You're just a bargaining tool now. When Isaac goes,

they're going to kill you anyway.*br

Br

No, she shook her head to clear away the voice. **I want to live I want to live*Br

Br

Scenes from her life were flashing through her mind, when she

came to the school, when Isaac left, when the people she loved so dearly

now came, and Garet...Garet...Br

Br

As if summoned by her thoughts, the Mars Adept charged in.
Her

heart lifted in her mauled ribcage when she saw him, but
quickly sank

again. This wasn't her Gareth, the one she knew so well. This
was

somebody something else. His teeth were bared, a growl
rising in his

chest. His eyes were wild, as wild as the corona of fire than
surrounded

him. He growled again, the savage sound of the hunt,
snapping his teeth.Br

Br

"Don't move!" Sheba warned him, turning her attention to
him.

"I'll kill her if you do! I will!"Br

Br

Mia made her decision. She stood, and staggered back to
the

wall. "He's beyond reasoning now."br

Br

She healed herself quickly, just as Gareth lunged for Sheba's
throat. Sheba didn't even try to block the downward sweep
of Gareth's

axe, simply dodged the blow. The edge hit the floor where
she had been

standing a moment before, the heated metal slicing through
the wood like

it was butter. Gareth pulled it out of the ground and advanced
on the

Jupiter Adept.Br

Br

"No!" Picard yelled, turning Gareth's attention to him. He
quickly cast Ice Missile. Gareth held up his axe, the blade
taking the

brunt of the blow. The shards of ice that deflected back to him melted

before they could get close.Br

Br

A sharp snap filled the air when the Mars Adept's axe broke.

He

dropped it, held up his hands, and called forth a storm of fire.br

br

Mia quickly cast douse to protect herself from the hungry flames.

When they died down she could see that Picard had done the same. Sheba

seemed to have disappeared.br

Br

Garet went at Picard, who cast Froth Spiral, his desperation behind the swirling water. The water that didn't evaporate was bushed

aside by the Mars Adept. Real fear was in Picard's eyes when he looked

up at Garet.br

Br

Garet's too powerful, Mia realized. *He'll kill him if this keeps up and possibly kill himself*Br

Br

If that happened, she didn't know what she would do. She looked

over at Picard, and the terrified Feizhi at his feet.Br

Br

*I have to stop this I'm the only one that can but not alone.Br

Br

She sent out a surge of Psynergy to Alex, able to communicate,

though without words.br

Br

He still understood.Br

Br

*****Br

Br

"Mia needs my help."br

Br

They were in Jenna's room. Felix was sprawled against her bed,

Alex was sitting on the floor, and Jenna was in the window seat, where she

had been playing softly on her lute.br

BR

"What?" Felix had barely been listening, but now he looked up

with full interest.br

Br

Jenna stopped playing the instrument and put it aside. "She needs your help? How do you know?"br

Br

Alex, who had made the statement, looked up, his eyes gleaming

strangely. "I just do," he stood and walked out the door.

Jenna looked

at Felix, who shrugged and got to his feet. They followed him into the

hallway.br

Br

"Is there anything we can do?" Jenna asked when they caught up,

looking up at the Mercury Adept.Br

Br

"I don't know, I just know that she needs me there," Alex admitted.Br

Br

"You won't make it."Br

Br

A girl stepped out from around the corner. She had short blonde hair and was wearing white that was splattered with red. She turned to face them directly, a short sword dark with blood in one hand. "I'll stop you."br
Br
She lunged at Alex, who sidestepped the blow neatly.Br
Br
"Let me handle this," Felix pushed Jenna behind him.Br
br
"But Felix-" she began.br
Br
"I'll be fine, Jenna," he waved her off. "Go with Alex, you might be able to help."br
Br
As he said this, he dodged another swing of the girl's sword.Br
Br
"Alright," Jenna nodded, even though he couldn't see her.
Alex
pulled her into a corridor that led to the side, leaving Felix to fight
Sheba alone. They could hear the sounds of battle behind them slowly
fading away into the distance.Br
br
The halls were darker here, no windows graced the walls, and
nobody had bothered to light the candles. A job that Jenna had to
sheepishly admit was hers. Their feet knew the way, but all the same,
Jenna reached for Alex's hand. His fingers tightened around hers.br

Br

"Don't worry, Felix will be fine," he said, squeezing her hand reassuringly.Br

Br

"I hope so," she said, truthfully. "I don't want him to die. I don't want anyone to die."Br

Br

"We all feel like that," Alex said. "But everyone has to die sometime, no matter who you are. It's a natural part of life, and no one

can change that," he smiled gently down at her. "Which is why we have to

do as much as we can during the short time that we are alive."Br

br

She couldn't return his smile, she was at a complete loss for words.br

br

*****Br

Br

I apologize for the short chapter. I had plans to make it longer, but it

was such a perfect place to end. Sorry for all of the cliffhangers, and

this stupid little note. I just wanted to say something that needed to

be said. This fic is not your average fic, and I realize that.

This

isn't some cute little story where everyone gets in a bit of a tiff but

everything turns out alright, or something that will make you smile.

This fic...I based on true, real life. In real life things aren't always

fields full of sunshine and yellow flowers and kitties playing with

butterflies. In real, actual life, bad things happen to good people,
people hurt and kill each other, and nothing comes out truly happy. I

have been flamed because I'm doing "that to Isaac", or "made Isaac that way", or something. I'm sorry if you feel that way, but that's life.

The end is far away, but I thought I should put this little note here,

because if you thought what was before was bad, it gets worse. It's a

bumpy ride, but I hope at least a few of you see it to the end. Thank

you for your time, and your patience.

***Chapter 8*: Chapter 7**

Alex: Yep, ff.net still hates me. Evil HTML!!!!!!! EVIL!!!!!!!br
**88888br
br

I'm sorry this has taken so long. It has been a long couple of weeks, or however long it has been. A lot of emotional stress (which sucks!) and college stuff. Sorry. I'll try to update faster from now on, but it'll probably just get more and more depressing...thought I should warn you.br

br
Chapter 7 Br

br
Mia lifted one hand, and sent a surge of water Psynergy in Gareth's direction.br

br
Contact.Br

Br
Garet didn't even flinch. He didn't even look at her.Br
br
There was no hope.Br

Br
center***/centerBr
br

Sheba lunged at the Venus Adept before her, sword upraised.br
She didn't get very far. Vines erupted from the floor, wrapping

around her wrists and ankles. Struggling did her no good,
the thick
plants only wound themselves tighter.Br
br

"You," she growled. The vines around her right wrist
tightened
painfully, forcing her to drop her sword. More vines snaked
up to
encircle her waist and her neck.Br
br

Felix dropped his hand, the glow of Psynergy fading from
around
him, and walked towards her.br

"Who are you?" she asked.Br
br

He didn't answer for a minute, kicking the sword away. It slid
across the floor with a clatter. He watched it go, then met
her gaze
with one of his own. "I don't know who I am."br
bR

"Oh, really," she closed her eyes, summoning the powers of
Jupiter. In an instant she had entered his mind, and seized
control.

Felix looked at her blankly, then the tell tale glow of
Psynergy gathered
around him and the vines receded. She stood for a moment,
rubbing her
wrists. "Well, now you are mine."br
br

He didn't even seem to have heard her, continuing to stare
at the

far wall.Br
br

"I have a job for you, my puppet." she smiled. br

br
center***/center
br

Isaac dashed into the front room.br
Br

Everything was in shambles, blackened and smoking. Gareth was
advancing on a blue haired man, who looked desperate to
get away. Feizhi
was at his feet, looking terrified. Mia was on the other side of
the
room, a lost look on her face.Br
br

"Isaac!" she saw him, and her lost look turned to one of
alarm.
br

"I can't do anything, Gareth's too strong!"br
Isaac bit his lip, and felt a coppery tang flood his mouth
when
he broke the skin. He had fought Gareth once before, and had
lost
miserably. Nothing could stop the Mars Adept in this state,
nothing but-Br
br

"I'll try to reach him."Br
br

Isaac jumped. Ivan was standing beside him. "I thought I told
you to stay there."br
br

Ivan let out a short laugh. "Since when have I listened to
you?"Br
"Oh, well, you do have a point."br
br

"Distract Gareth," Ivan's purple eyes became hard. "At any
cost.
I'll try to reach him mind to mind. It's the only way."br
br

"Oh, see, that'd be a great idea if he hadn't of already
almost
taken my head off."Br
br

"Just do it," Ivan sounded slightly exasperated.br
br

"When I die I'm going to haunt you," Isaac glared at him,
then
advanced on the Mars Adept. "Garet!"br
br

Garet ignored him, sending a tongue of flame at the
nameless man
in the doorway. Isaac worked quickly, pulling up an earthen
barrier
between the unprotected man and the attack. The fire hit
the stone wall
and fanned out, quickly heating the rock to the point of
melting it.Br
The man, obviously a Mercury Adept, cast douse, protecting

himself and Feizhi from the heat.br
br

The fire died down, and Isaac's barrier crumbled into a pile of smoking rubble. Gareth turned to him, his eyes crimson slits.br
br

"This is going to hurt," Isaac muttered, holding up his sword. Gareth charged him and grabbed at the sword, ignoring the edges slicing into his palms. He ripped it from Isaac's grasp like the Venus Adept was little more than a child, throwing it to one side.br
br

Isaac backed up and cast Ragnarok. The golden blade formed above him, then crashed down from thin air. Gareth held up his left arm. The blade hit his forearm, and shattered in slow motion. Fragments of light exploded outward, the prisms casting rainbows on the walls before dissipating.br
br

Before Isaac could retaliate, Gareth curled one large hand around his neck and lifted him into the air above his head. It had never really occurred to Isaac just how BIG Gareth was until that moment when he was being choked to death. He clawed desperately at Gareth's vice-like grip,

struggling to breathe. Darkness tried to claim his vision,
ringing
around the world that seemed to be so distorted. The shots
of everyone
around him sounded as if they were coming from far away.Br
br

Time stopped for a brief moment.Br
br

His world was darkness, complete and absolute.Br
br

And from within that darkness came a voice he had heard
only as a
small child, and in his dream.Br
br

His mother's.br
br

"Don't give up," she said softly, gently. "Don't give up,
Isaac."br
br

A girl's scream cut off his mother's words. A scream from
somewhere far away, so faint he could barely hear it. Then, it
grew
louder and louder, so loud that it hurt his ears. The world
came back
into sharp focus so fast it left his head reeling. Mia was
screaming,
and sending wave after wave of Psynergy at Garet. The blue
Psynergy
surrounded the Mars Adept like ripples, and it felt like it was
cutting

through his very soul. He wanted to scream, but Gareth's
fingers cut off
any air through his windpipe.Br
br

Garet let loose a howl of pain, whipped around, and threw
Isaac
into Mia.br
br
*****br
Br

"What do we have to gain in this?"br
br

"Whatever you want," Feh smiled, but it didn't reach his
eyes.
He didn't trust these people, he wasn't sure if they even
trusted
themselves. He had never seen the two Adepts faces, only
the cloaks they
kept up at all times, as they did their guard. "Just bring Isaac
back,
and kill everyone else there."br
br

"Even your two little puppies?" one of the figures, her voice
deep and raspy, leaned over the table. "The Jupiter Adept
and the
Lemurian?"br
br

"If they have failed," Feh leaned back into his chair. "Which
is
most likely."Br
br

The two cloaked Adepts swept out of the room. When they were gone, Nyunpa entered the room. The old priest from Luchin Temple gave Feh a stern look, his black eyes hard. "You have gone too far, Feh."Br
br

"I thought you might become a problem, old man," Feh bared his teeth in the parody of a smile.br
br

"I am only gave a word of advice," Nyunpa held up one hand as a signal of peace. "You were fine when you were playing with puppies, but your wolves will one day turn on you."br

br
*****br
br

Ivan wanted to help, wanted to at least ask Mia and Isaac if they were all right. The two Adepts had hit the wall hard, too hard. But he couldn't risk breaking the connection he had with Garet.br
br

Garet! Listen to me! he called out to the Mars Adept's mind. Once Garet was distracted, it should have been a simple matter to contact him. But this time, this time, his mind was a mess. No coherent thought

shouted out at Ivan, no rational thinking, only fire.br
br

*Let me show you.*Br
br

He recognized Sheba's mind, her presence and her "voice".
She
lead him deeper into the very depths of the inferno,
radiating calm in
waves of violet. To no avail. If it weren't for Sheba, Ivan
would have
begun to panic, the Gareth he knew seemed to be gone. All
that was left
was flames, half finished thoughts and ideas buffeting at
Ivan and Sheba,
trying to throw them off course.Br
br

But nothing could.br
br

*Garet!*Br
br

Ivan? some small part of Gareth's mind was still sane, still
his
friend. The mental voice sounded weak, and faded. *Is that
you?*br
br

Garet, let us help you, Sheba said calmly. *Ivan, lend your
power to me. I can do this.*Br
br

Ivan felt himself growing weaker. Sheba had complete
control

over Gareth's mind, the flames were slowly dying down, the thoughts returning more or less to normal.br
br

And then Ivan was back. Gareth stood, looking at him with tired brown eyes that seemed to be devoid of the fire that usually burned behind them, before he sank slowly to his knees. Ivan wanted to do much of the same, but instead walked to his friend and put on hand lightly on his shoulder.br
br

"I'm okay," Gareth answered his unasked question. "I...I'll be alright."br
Br

Ivan nodded, then turned.Br
br

Sheba was standing in the doorway with Felix, a look of murder on her face. "Well well well," she said softly. "This won't be hard at all."br

br
*****br
Br

Once again, I'm sorry for how long this took. Real life stuff, and changing a lot of things from the original version. The part I had

written out didn't really have the feel that it should have, so I had to base my ideas on what I had and then I rewrote pretty much the whole thing. Again, sorry, and updates will be quicker from now on.

***Chapter 9*: Chapter 8**

Hi everyone, miss this fic?

Isaac: ::holds up a sign that says "they might have"::

Alright, well, here it goes!

Chapter 8

"Felix?" Ivan stepped forward.

"Felix, what are you doing?" Gareth asked, managing to get to his feet.

"Mia, be careful," Ivan said softly. "That's not Felix. Sheba has control over his mind."

Sheba motioned Felix forward, and he obeyed her instantly, taking the step that closed the gap between them. She placed her hand in the crook of his elbow, smiling like a snake.

"Killing her will break the connection, won't it?" Gareth asked him in an undertone.

Ivan shook his head. "I don't know."

He felt lost, completely lost. He had never seen a spell like this before, Sheba was much more powerful than he was. She had already sent Hama into a coma, and Hama was more knowledgeable in the ways of

mind than anybody he had ever met. What could she do to the rest of them? To the people he considered friends?

A faint golden glow had surrounded their feet, a thin pillar of light rising up inbetween himself and Jenna. If he didn't know any better, he would have thought.

"It's Gaia!" Ivan yelled, jumping from the spot. Gareth leapt the other way, and the floor they had been standing on exploded, colossal chunks of rock being torn from the earth hitting the ceiling, skipping across the floor. A tremendous amount of dust was thrown into the air during the attack. Ivan coughed, he couldn't see, he could barely breathe.

The dust settled in a matter of moments. Felix was standing in front of Sheba, death in his otherwise empty eyes, Sheba's sword in his hand, the blade still coated with Mia's blood.

"If I have to kill her, I will."

Ivan turned around. Isaac was on one knee, the sword Gareth had torn from his grasp earlier in one hand. His voice was a mere rasp around the damage the Mars Adept had inflicted on his throat.

"Isaac-"

"And if I have to go through Felix to get to her, then so be it,"

Isaac got to his feet, stumbled backward, but still managed to stay standing. "I'll do whatever it takes to stop her. To stop this."

He gripped the sword with both hands, then ran at Felix. The other Venus Adept was ready for him, he knocked the sword from Isaac's

hands, then hit him in the side of the head with the flat of his own

blade. Isaac's eyes closed, and he slid to the ground.

Of course he won't kill him, Isaac is the one they want* Ivan realized. *The rest of us are fair game but Isaac's safe.*

Felix turned to him, sword up held.

"Felix!"

I'm going to die

"Felix, what are you-"

Felix jabbed at Ivan, hitting him in the ribs. Unbelievable pain

flooded through him, and he collapsed. *I'm going to die*

His lifeblood was draining from him, he was getting weaker by the moment.

I really am going to die

Ivan wasn't moving.

Alex cast Ice Missile, hitting Felix head on. Shards of blue tinted ice rained down on the Venus Adept, who quickly threw up a barrier. While he was distracted, Alex did the only thing he could think of.

He cast Pure Wish.

It was the most powerful of all Mercury spells, impossible for most Adepts to master.

But he wasn't most Adepts.

Blue light flooded through the room, rippling much like it's element. Ivan's wound closed up, and he sat up. Isaac's one wounds were healed, and he opened his eyes. All around Alex, everyone was regaining consciousness, gaining new power, the blue light seeping into their bodies.

When it was over, Alex glared at Felix, who looked back at him with hollow eyes.

"I don't know what's going on but I won't allow this," he hissed.

"Felix, what are you doing?" Jenna shrieked, standing behind him.

"You could have killed Ivan! You could have killed everyone"

Felix didn't reply, simply raised one hand and cast Ragnarok.

Everything had slowed down.

Isaac was lying on the ground, Alex and Jenna were standing over him, Felix was off to his left, one hand raised.

The golden blade came down. Jenna screamed something, but he couldn't make it out, his heart was pounding so hard in his ears.

For a minute, it seemed like nothing had happened. Ragnarok had disappeared, Alex and Jenna were still standing, Felix still had one hand in the air.

Then slowly, all so slowly, Alex took one step forward, then fell on his face.

"Alex!" Jenna went to her knees, shaking the Mercury Adepts shoulders. "ALEX!!"

Felix stepped forward, bringing up his sword to cut Jenna down.

Isaac grabbed the sword that was lying next to him, kippered to his feet, and blocked Felix's blade with his own. The point of Felix's blade skittered down his own, throwing a shower of sparks into the air.

Isaac had his attention. He knocked Felix's sword off course, then blocked it when Felix tried to cut at him. He locked his blade with the other Venus Adept's, pushing him back against the wall.

Whoever had healed him had done well. All of his strength had returned.

"I'll stop you, and then I'll stop her," he smiled grimly at Felix, who made no emotional response, only cast Quake Sphere. The ground beneath Isaac's feet trembled, and he jumped back. The floor boards shattered, the Earth heaving, rising and falling waves. When it shuddered, then ceased, Felix was ready. He charged Isaac, who brought up his own sword. Felix had never used a sword, the only abilities he had were from Sheba.

And Sheba didn't know half of what he did.

He slapped Felix's sword onto the floor. Felix stared at his blade, pinned by Isaac's, before looking up at the other Venus Adept.

"One down," Isaac said softly, and punched Felix in the face. He lost consciousness instantly, falling next to his sword, blood streaming from his broken nose.

"Isaac!"

He turned at the small, choked voice. Jenna had turned Alex

over. Ivan, who had gotten up without him noticing, was looking down at the Mercury Adept with disbelief. Isaac dropped his sword and walked shakily over.

Alex's eyes were still open.

The gaping wound in his chest had killed him instantly.

"Oh no." Garet, who was leaning up against the wall, his eyes wide with horror, muttered.

"This it's my fault," Isaac couldn't believe it, didn't want to believe it. He hadn't even known Alex that long, hadn't even gotten a chance to really know him. "This is my fault. This...it's my..."

I have to do something, anything!

Then it came to him. *Revive.*

"I can bring him back," he said softly.

Ivan looked at him, his eyes huge. "Isaac you can't. You can't cast Revive, your life is tied directly to your Psynergy. You could die."

"At least I have that choice," he whispered, kneeling beside the fallen Mercury Adept. He looked up into Jenna's tearful face. "I'm not afraid to die."

"No," Mia was standing above them, her eyes full of loss. "You're not afraid to die. You're only afraid to live."

Isaac ignored her. He was already casting the spell.

A sea of golden light met his eyes, then was replaced by darkness. Pure, cold darkness.

He seemed to be moving forward, but he couldn't really tell, until he saw light in front of him.

They shone like stars, each a different color. A million different stars, a million different hues. Some screamed, some cried, some had long since fallen into silence. They tore at him when he came amongst them, hissing their hate of him. Of all things living.

He was lost.

Isaac was still kneeling next to Alex, his eyes glowing gold.

"Isaac?" Gareth asked, coming forward. "Isaac?"

The Venus Adept didn't even look at him.

"Stop him," Sheba strode forward. "He can't die, we still have to take him back."

Gareth turned to her, grabbed the collar of her tunic in one large fist, and lifted her into the air. "Shut up."

He pinned her against the wall. "Shut up."

Alex: Okay, since ff.net hates my HTML, this is all supposed to be italicized. If you want the better version go to Gareth's Kitchen. My HTML is happy there, so review here first! Thank you for your time. Back to the story!!! ^_^;;

"Where am I?"

"You are here."

"Where is here?"

"You don't know?"

"No."

"Who are you?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"I do not know you."

"So you can not tell me."

"No."

Silence, so complete it consumed everything stretched on for an eternity.

"What am I doing here?"

"Only you know that."

"Why can't I remember?"

"You are torn."

"Torn?"

"Between two worlds, between two realities. Torn by your will,
torn by those around you. Torn."

"How do I get back to my world?"

"By finishing what you started here."

In the darkness, amid the strange cold lights that still
screamed
and clawed, he felt a familiar presence. One of the lights, a
dim,
shadowy ghost of a face in its depths.

"I'm here for him."

The light glowed brighter, stronger.

"What do you plan to do with him?"

"Take him back with me."

"A trade must be made."

"A trade?"

"Your life for his."

"Is there another way?"

"You are an Adept."

"Yes."

"Your Psynergy."

He understood.

Ha, I'm evil. But before I put up Chapter 9 (hopefully soon, right?) I

need a little favor. The title that I have now ("Adventures in Adept

Training") was actually a joke. I need a new title, but I'm being stupid

and I can't think of anything. That's where you come in! E-mail me at

isaac_glen@juno.com

And give me all of the titles you can think of. I'll pick the one title

I like the most from each person, and then we'll have a poll on it at the

website (www.geocities.com/alexglaven for all of those who DON'T know...)

so that I can get a new title! Please help me out! Thanks!

Alright, sorry, about the cliff hanger. Maybe the next chapter won't be

one. Oh, and I'm sorry about killing Alex, too.

Isaac: ::holds up a sign that says "and now you're killing me..."::

Maybe. R&R!!!!

***Chapter 10*: Chapter 9**

Or I don't know. One of the two. Yeah. That's it.
Anywho, I wasn't going to post this until I had enough
names to make a
choice on what the new name should be. To answer some
questions, I
really don't like the name, but if you do, tell me so.
Otherwise I won't
write Chapter 10 until I have enough new titles. On with the
story.

Chapter 9

Once the Jupiter Adept left in his charge was unconscious,
Garet
couldn't turn away from Isaac.

The Venus Adept was looking paler by the minute. The glow
that
had started at his eyes had encircled him and Alex's body, a
single shaft
of the light rising towards the ceiling. He looked almost
unearthly,
like he had died with Alex.

He isn't dead. He isn't going to die, and Alex will be fine,
Garet told himself firmly. *He has to be, they all have to be.*

"Garet, are you okay?" a gentle hand descended upon his
arm like a
dove. He looked over at Mia. The Mercury Adept was looking
at him,
concern in her deep blue eyes.

"You shouldn't be worried about me," he muttered. "Worry about Isaac and Alex."

"But-"

"Mia, don't talk to me," he nearly snapped. She continued to look at him for a moment, her eyes full of hurt, before slowly turning away, her hand leaving his arm. He thought about apologizing, but decided against it.

It would be better if he just drove her away.

I lost control, he thought dimly. He couldn't bare to look at Isaac again, so he looked at his hands. Large hands, callused by years of training with staff and sword, weather beaten, nails chewed down unevenly. He clenched those hands, watching the chewed upon nails create crescent shaped imprints in the skin of his palms, digging deeper, then finally drawing blood.

He was completely enthralled with the sight, red rubies gathering in the cracks of his hands, becoming streams that slid from his palms and dripped onto the floor, splashing in miniscule red pools. Pools that were far too similar to the ones that lay at intervals around the room, despite the difference in size. Red blood, red like his element, Mars.

Mars, God of War, he thought numbly, still watching the blood slide over his palms. *Mars, the element of fire. Fire, the element that fascinates mortal man.*

Somehow, then, he knew. He simply knew the elements, better than he knew himself.

Venus, Goddess of Love, the element of Earth. Venus Adepts had the ability to control the Earth, and heal, as the earth could. And Isaac, despite years being taught to show no compassion, no mercy, no love, felt all of these things so strongly still.

Mercury, the Messenger of the Gods, the element of Water. Healing was an attribute given to all Mercury Adepts. And calmness like a quiet, undisturbed pool. Deep, like the oceans, and sometimes unpredictable.

Jupiter, God of Thunder, the element of Wind. Reading minds and controlling the very composition of the weather was what Jupiter Adepts were capable of, among many other things.

Mars, God of War, element of Fire. Nothing good came from fire, only death and destruction, and it was all that a Mars Adept was capable

of. Death. For centuries fire had been associated with Hell, the spirit prison in the bowels of the earth where eternal torture was merited out to those unworthy of the purity and love of Heaven.

And I, so closely linked to my element, I am the one that tortures. he clenched his fists still harder, and the rivers of crimson overflowed. *Mars, the element of Hell I can only hurt the people I care about the most.*

He heard a soft groan, and turned swiftly, unclenching his hands. He felt the almost tickling sensation of blood running down his fingers, but ignored it.

Felix was sitting up, hold his head with one hand, the other attempting to stem the flow of blood from his nose.

"What happened?" he asked, looking around dazedly. Either his own loss of consciousness of Sheba's had broken the spell. "What, how did I get down here?"

That was when he began to panic. "Where's that girl?"

"Over here," Gareth jerked his head to indicate Sheba's limp form, guarded jealously by Picard. The Mercury Adept had done little after the battle that had taken place with Felix. He seemed to be in utter shock still.

"Let me fix that," Mia walked towards him, pushing his hand away from his nose. It made Gareth wince, Felix's nose was slightly to one side, bruises blooming over his eyes. When Isaac aimed to break someone's nose, he didn't mess around. "This might hurt," Mia was warning Felix. A complete understatement, she took hold of his nose and jerked it back into place before casting Ply. Felix let out a yell that could have arisen the dead. Gareth almost had half a mind to turn and see if Alex had done just that, but stopped himself, nearly retching up what he had eaten for breakfast. He didn't know where the thought had come from, but it made him sick.

"You're not kidding," Felix muttered when Mia was done with him. But his nose was in the right place, he wasn't bleeding, and the dark circles around his eyes had faded away. He looked around Mia, and his eyes widened in horror.

He had seen Isaac and Alex.

"Wh-what?" he whispered. "What's going on?"

Mia bowed her head, obviously unable to answer. No one else

seemed very willing to, so Gareth did. "Alex is dead," he said flatly, trying not to let his own words hit home too hard. He had to believe that Isaac could bring him back. He HAD to. "Isaac is casting Revive."

Felix looked like he had been hit by a ton of bricks. He went pale, and brought one hand to the side of his head.

"I...I remember...I...I..." he stuttered, staring at nothing, absently pulling on his hair. "I...I killed him. I killed him..."

He curled his knees up, folded his arms over his knees and buried his face into them. From his shaking shoulders, Gareth guessed that he was crying.

He half expected a reassuring word from Mia, or Jenna, or somebody. Anybody. He knew he couldn't say anything, something seemed to be caught in his throat.

Everyone was just as speechless as he was.

He could see again.

After an endless sea of the dead, even the site of Alex's corpse was a relief. He stared at it for a moment, before realizing that a shaft of pure light was lighting gently on the Mercury Adept, right over

the wound

But there was no wound. The gash in his chest had closed up completely, leaving only the tear in his shirt and the blood congealing on the ground around him to testify that it had been there at all. What looked like feathers of the light were drifting down gently from the ceiling. He watched them idly, wondering what they were, until they lighted gently on the body, melting to become one with it.

Life returned to Alex's eyes in an instant, just before they closed. He coughed feebly before he was able to breath in sharp, shuddering gasps.

"Isaac?" he muttered.

Everything hit Isaac at once. Before Alex had said his name, he wasn't sure if he even remembered it.

"It worked," he smiled, glad that he was already kneeling when he sat back. He felt dizzy, disoriented, and tired. So very tired.

"ALEX!" Jenna shrieked, hugging the Mercury Adept tightly around the neck. Alex's eyes widened, and he patted Jenna's head a little awkwardly. "Hi Jenna."

Isaac looked around. Sheba was slumped against the wall, Picard

standing over her, looking at Alex with relief. Felix was awake, his arms wrapped around his knees that he had drawn to his chest, staring at Alex in utter disbelief. Mia was crying silently. Feizhi was sitting next to her, something of the terror she had experienced still in her eyes, but she was smiling. Ivan looked like a load had been taken off his shoulders and was shouting something, he wasn't sure what. And Gareth.

Garet was staring at him, his expression unreadable, his hands covered in blood.

Isaac wasn't sure if he wanted to know whose it was.

"Isaac," Alex said slowly. Isaac turned to face him. Jenna had released him, and was also looking at him worriedly. "You, you brought me back."

"I guess I did," he replied softly, not sure what to say. It wasn't every day that you brought someone back from the dead.

"Thank you," Alex smiled, but his eyes remained haunted.

Of course, I probably look the same way, Isaac reminded himself. *We just saw things that no mortal should every see.*

"Are you alright?" Jenna reached around Alex to put one hand on

his shoulder. They hadn't known each other very long at all, but Isaac had found himself rather attached to the Mars Adept despite everything.

"Yeah," he returned the smile Alex was giving him. "I think I am."

"You," Gareth had turned to Picard, hate in his eyes. "Why are you here?"

"I'm following orders," Picard replied softly.

"You're a Lemurian," Ivan said. "What are you doing in Angora, and why are you working for Feh?"

Picard looked at him with golden eyes, as if estimating how much he could trust the Jupiter Adept before answering. "I want to be free. I owe a life debt, and until it's paid, I can't go home."

Picard had never witnessed a death until that moment.

The closest he had come to the cold grip of mortality was when the elders of his clan climbed into boats that would carry them to the life beyond.

He had heard of very few deaths by accident, mostly the injured were healed before such tragedy could occur. If the accident killed the

unfortunate soul, the body was never seen by civilians.

He had been told once that when someone died, it was as if they were merely asleep.

That was something that he didn't believe in anymore. When the Mercury Adept. Alex had died, he had known. It wasn't from the wound he had received, it was that he simply knew. Whatever the body was, it wasn't a person anymore. Only an empty, broken shell.

He hadn't liked that. He hadn't liked it at all. And when Felix had awoken, and seen his deeds with his own eyes.

"A life debt?" Ivan, the Jupiter Adept, gave him a curious look. How could they be so calm? One of their number had just died. He had returned, yes, but he had died.

"Feh saved me from one of your prisons," Picard answered, looking at the floor so that he did not have to look at any of them. "There is little love for Lemurians or Adepts of any kind left in the world. I only want to be free, and Sheba only wants revenge for the people that tried to kill her."

"If I come with you," Isaac said, slowly. "You have to leave them alone."

Picard could only stare at him.

"You'll be free, she'll have her revenge," Isaac explained. "I don't want any more death here, do you?"

"N-no," the Lemurian answered shakily, unable to meet the Venus Adept's eyes. "I don't. If you come quietly, we'll leave them alone."

"Alright," Isaac tried to stand, but he quickly found himself on his knees. He looked up at Picard anyway, his eyes full of haunted shadows. "Then I'll go with you."

Alright, now you all think I'm insane. Well, I'm going to tell you where a lot of the ideas for this chapter came from. First off, I was reading Triad Orion's fic, Trails of Destiny. Go. Read it. Now. It's very good, and he'd better update or I'll sic an angry Gareth on him. It was in Chapter 18 where he mentioned something about the Mars Lighthouse. If you read it, you'll find out what. ^_^ It gave me an idea, and I stuck with it.

The second is I've listened to "Hero" off of the Spiderman soundtrack one too many times.

Well, review and stuff, it makes me happy! I love all of you people who review! ^_^

***Chapter 11*: Chapter 10**

Eeeeeee...it's been a while since I've updated. Sorry, folks, I had Writer's Block. ^_^;;; Really, really bad. ^_^;;; All I've been able to write is my happy light-hearted stories that Midnight C and the rest of you love so much. But here I am, with Chapter 10! Be happy!

Chapter 10

Ivan sighed, his hands clenching and unclenching.

He had tried everything, EVERYTHING, but Hama wasn't waking up.

"Aunt Hama," he muttered. She looked very peaceful, as if she was asleep. Garet had moved her to the bed, and in a sign of respect, had closed her eyes. The old woman was pale, the lines around her eyes and mouth far too obvious, as was the silver in her hair shining in the lamp light. It scared him half to death that his aunt, his aunt that had seemed so ageless, could suddenly appear so ancient.

"You have to wake up," he pleaded. "Please, you have to wake up."

"Ivan, Isaac's leaving."

It was Mia, standing in the frame of the door, something deeper than sadness in her eyes.

"Alright," Ivan got to his feet, and managed to somehow grin at her. "It's going to be alright."

"Yeah," Mia returned the gesture, but her smile was so weak she might as well have not bothered. "Everything will be alright."

They left Hama on the bed, walking the twisted corridors of the school until they were at the front door.

The entry way was still a complete mess, even two days after Picard and Sheba's merciless attack. Broken boards and rock still littered the ground, and several holes in the ceiling were a testament to Felix's Gaia.

"Maybe it's a good thing that Aunt Hama isn't awake," Ivan commented. "She'd throw an absolute fit."

Mia's smile was genuine this time. Ivan looked at her for a moment, before turning to the frame of the front door.

Isaac was standing there, in a newly pressed General's uniform, dark indigo and the purest white. A cape was pinned to his shoulders, small golden sun-shaped disks holding the cloth in place.

"We'll miss you," a tearful Jenna had a hold of one of his hands.

"We'll never forget you."

"And I'll never forget you," he smiled.

"Thank you, Isaac," Alex looked rather awkward addressing the soldier before him. "I owe my life to you."

Isaac almost blushed, but managed to nod firmly. Ivan looked around. Everyone was there, Alex, Jenna, himself, Mia, Picard and Felix were discussing something in the background, Garet turning to look at Mia, and Felix doing the same with Jenna.

"Ivan," the Jupiter Adept turned at the sound of his name. Isaac had a sad smile on his face. "You turned out alright."

"Thanks," Ivan almost laughed. "You didn't turn out too bad yourself."

"Isaac," Mia crossed the gap separating them and hugged him close. The Venus Adept stiffened, but slowly relaxed. "Isaac, I'm never going to forget you, or what you've done."

"I haven't done anything," Isaac pushed her away gently. "Take care of yourself, Mia."

"Take care of myself?!" Mia choked, tears in her eyes. "What about you?"

"Worry about me, then," his eyes held some amusement in them. "I suppose someone has to."

"You suppose."

"Take care of her, Gareth," Isaac looked over her head to where the Mars Adept was standing.

"I won't be able to," Gareth admitted. "I'm going with you."

"I still think you made the wrong decision," Isaac glared at his childhood friend.

"My mind's made up," Gareth leaned back against a wide tree trunk.

"I know that," Isaac looked over to the small fire Gareth had conjured up. "You're stubborn, but I still think that you made the wrong decision. Did you see Mia? She was completely heart broken-"

"You-you're going?" Mia had stared at Gareth, her world shattering in her eyes. "But why? WHY?!"

"You'll understand someday."

"She'll get over it," Gareth shrugged. "It was for the best."

"No it wasn't"

"You don't understand, Isaac," something in the Mars Adept's eyes made Isaac shut up, and fast. A fire seemed to be raging in Gareth's mind, a fire that couldn't be tamed or controlled, only a fool would try. Or someone who had nothing else to lose.

"It will take us another three days to get to Xian at the pace we are going," Picard sat next to Isaac.

"It'll be cold," Isaac looked up at the star studded sky visible beyond the tops of the trees. He knew fall was coming, the leaves had yet to change their color, and the true cold had yet to set into the air, but he knew. The trees sang their soft song to him, of shedding their summer coats and going into deep slumber. It was quieter than it usually was, but he could still feel it, still hear it.

"We have the Mars Adept, I'm sure we'll be fine," Picard nodded to Gareth.

"Having me might be a risk you're not willing to take."

"Mia?" Jenna opened the door to Mia's room, the lamp behind her

mutting a path of light into the darkened room. The Mercury Adept was sitting in her windowsill, the moonlight that flooded through the glass panes turning her hair silver. "Mia?"

"W-why?" Mia choked, turning towards Jenna. Even in the half light of the lamp, Jenna could see her tears gleaming. "He was so cold, and distant, and now he's gone. He's gone."

"I think Gareth has some things to figure out," Jenna crossed the room and sat next to her. "I know there are things I don't understand about the Mars element, and I think when he went berserk like he did a lot of things he didn't want to think about fell into place."

"I could have helped him," Mia glared at the far wall. "Ivan could have helped him."

"Some things you have to find out for yourself," Jenna carefully put one arm around the other woman's shoulders, squeezing reassuringly.

"I think that's what Gareth went to do. He'll be back, Mia. He'll be back."

Mia sobbed, and Jenna resolved to stay there by her, no matter what it took.

The ground beneath him trembled slightly, but that was all.

"Damn it," Isaac growled.

"What's wrong?"

He whirled around, his heart beating hard against his ribcage.

"Garet, you scared me! You think you'd make some noise when you're sneaking up on poor innocent heart-attack prone Venus Adepts!"

"It's not hard to sneak up on someone when they're trying to cause earthquakes," Garet said dryly. "What are you doing?"

"It's my Psynergy," Isaac glared at the offending ground. "It's not working right. It's too weak."

"You just BARELY preformed a miracle using your Psynergy three days ago, give it time," Garet advised him.

"Garet, why did you come?"

Garet paused, as if trying to decide exactly what to say. Just as Isaac thought he wasn't going to say anything, he began.

"I realized something, when I lost control of everything back at the school, and nearly killed you and Mia.

"That was an accident," Isaac said quickly.

"I realize that," Garet nodded. "But my element, Mars. Mars was the God of War, and all fire is capable of is destruction."

"That's not true," Isaac argued. "Fire does good things!"

"Like what?"

"Well, it gives warmth, and it cooks things," Isaac cast about for ideas. "And it burns useless stuff like dead leaves and old clothes and Ivan."

Garet smiled slightly. "Fire also causes death, destruction. It destroys everything it touches, including lives."

"So, you left because fire burns things?" Isaac asked, trying to understand. Garet had changed in more ways than he could possibly have known.

"I left, because there are things I need to know," Garet looked up at the trees. "Things I need to find out myself. And things there were things I didn't want to face yet, back at the school. Not so soon after."

He shrugged.

Isaac, Garet! Sheba's voice rang in their minds. *We're moving out!*

"Yes, mommy," Isaac muttered, and Garet laughed.

"Okay, children, we're going to play 'let's fix the house' now,"
Ivan announced.

"I don't like that game," Felix said solemnly.

"It's not fun," Alex agreed. "And without Gareth or Isaac around,
Felix and I have to do the grunt work. You just have to sit there and
pretend you're being useful."

"It's what I do best," Ivan smiled.

"And Alex will run off and leave me to do the grunt work,"
Felix
glared at his friend.

"That would be what I do best," Alex returned his glare with a
Cheshire Cat grin. "Plus, you owe me one."

Felix bit his lip and looked at the ground.

"I was JOKING," Alex looked exasperated. "JOKING."

"Well, it isn't funny," Jenna threw a board at him, and he
caught
it with some difficulty, the end still knocked the wind out of
him and he
ended up on his back.

"Hey, where's Mia?" Felix ignored Alex's attempts to get his
attention from where he was on the floor, trying to breath.

"Up in her room, crying," Jenna shook her head. "I miss Gareth
too, but it must be so hard on her."

"I'm sure it is," Felix sighed, then looked down at Alex, who had been hitting his leg with the board. "WHAT?!"

"Your sister's mean," Alex said matter of factly.

Alright, just because I can, I'll tell you where the inspiration came from. The soundtrack for the chapter was Jars of Clay, "Much Afraid", mostly number 2 ("Fade to Grey", a really shway song for all of you that don't listen to JoC) and the inspiration came from Elena forcing me at gunpoint to write the chapter. No, not really, but she DID threaten to do so...she's kind of scary.
Garet: KIND OF scary?
Okay, VERY scary.
Garet: Oh, yeah.
Anyway, review! And stuff...

***Chapter 12*: Chapter 11**

::smiles and laughs nervously:: Well, it's been a while, hasn't it?

::ducks a barrage of nasty stuff:: HEY! I'm updating now, aren't I?

Well...I won't keep you from reading the story...so, I give you...

Adventures in Adept Training

Chapter 11

"We'll be out of this forest soon," Sheba announced to those behind her. "And then we'll be in the Lamakan. The Mars Adept will be fine, but Picard will have to keep the rest of us cool."

"No wonder Feh sent us, you two are weak."

Isaac peered ahead. Two cloaked figures had come out onto the path. One of them, taller than the other, was holding an immense broadsword. The other appeared to be leaning on a staff. At least, that's what Isaac thought before he saw the giant scythe blade attached to the top.

He shivered, as did the forest around him. Mars Adepts, and they smelled of blood.

"Who are you?" Sheba yelled.

"We're here to escort you, no need to fear us," the one with the scythe, a woman by her voice, said softly. Her tone sent shivers of fear up his spine.

* * *

Garet squinted, trying to see through the shimmering heat waves that rose from the sand. Only more sand, rocks, and cliffs far off in the distance greeted him. He licked his dry lips, wishing desperately that he had some water.

Even though fire was his element, even he was having problems with the heat. Sheba, Isaac, and Feizhi were barely getting along with Picard casting Douse every few steps.

The two people that had stopped them had thrown off their cloaks some way back. They both had burning red eyes and strangely colored skin. The man had dusty blue skin and steel grey hair that hung over his face, the woman's skin was a pale rose color and her hair, so blonde it was almost white, fell in waves down her back. They were both wearing light armor with the symbol for Fire emblazoned on the breast plate.

He still didn't know their names, and wasn't entirely sure that he trusted them. But he knew it would be suicidal to question them, he could feel their power radiating from them like the dry heat of the desert.

They had been traveling in the desert for some time now, leaving their horses on the edge of the wasteland on order of their guides.

"The desert is especially hot in this season," the woman had told them. "The horses would only die after we gave them all of our water and food. We'd be quick to follow."

Garet shivered at the memory despite the heat.

"We camp here," the man stopped near a small outcropping of rocks that at least promised a little shade.

The woman glanced up at the sun, which seemed to be magnified by the heat. "It's nearing the hottest part of the day. I suggest you all get into the shade as best you can."

Picard found an overhang in the rocks and lead Feizhi and Sheba inside. He cast Douse on them both, before turning and doing the same to Garet and Isaac.

Normally Garet avoided water at all costs, but the cold liquid on his skin after the hot sun was a relief he sorely needed.

"Get some sleep, we move at nightfall," the man told them gruffly.

* * *

"What now?"

Everyone looked at Alex after the unexpected question. The Adepts were lounging on the porch of the school after Felix had shifted the ridges of wood into seats. The school was partially repaired, they still needed to go to the town and get a new door for both the back and front of the school, and the front room now had a dirt floor.

"Well, I was thinking we could lay some stone in the front room to make it more presentable," Ivan suggested.

"I mean after that," Alex tried to be more specific. "We don't have anyone to guide us in training anymore, and it's not as if we really need training at all anyway. So what now?"

Mia curled into a more comfortable position. "Well I could go back to Imil and become their Healer. Ivan could go home to his parents, I really don't know"

"Felix, Jenna and I could stay around here," Alex suggested. "I

mean, even if Hama'swell" he was silent for a minute before he continued. "There are still other Adepts out there, kids that have been disowned by their parents, orphanswe could teach them."

"You'll need a Jupiter Adept," Ivan pointed out. "And I'm NOT going back to the Jupiter Clan."

"What do you say, Mia?" Jenna looked over to her friend hopefully. "We could start our own school! It's a good idea, don't you think?"

Mia smiled, but it was sad and strained. "This placeit holds far too many memories. I just want a new place, to start over."

Jenna opened her mouth to protest, but Felix shushed her. "We understand, Mia. If that's what you want to do, then we'll support it."

A branch in the forest snapped, 'causing all of the Adepts to jump to their feet as one. Felix immediately stepped out in front of Jenna, and Alex took up protecting Ivan and Mia.

A man wearing a worn brown traveler's cloak came from the surrounding forest. His clothes looked like they were in sore need of repair and were covered in dust. He lowered his hood, revealing a tired, kind smile that radiated from his brown eyes. His hair was brown, streaked with silver, and his face was weather beaten.

"No need to be on your guard," he held up one hand in peace, and removed his cloak, showing that he had no weapons on him.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" Felix asked, his hand on his training staff.

"My name is Kyle, and I'm looking for someone named Isaac."

* * *

"Kill him."

Isaac looked at the man before him, Dodonpa by name. He was a thief, and a cowardly one at that. He had been holding a crime organization within the town of Lunpa. They had looted countless merchants, killing the guards of the caravans and lining their skulls across the gate as their trophies.

"Kill him," Feh ordered him again.

Thisthis filth doesn't deserve to live, Isaac thought, bringing up the sword. *He's killed countless people, destroyed livelihoods, torn families apart*

But he knew, even as he thought it, that he couldn't kill him.

"Do it, boy!" Feh glared at him. "Kill him."

"Yes, kill me, boy," Dodonpa leered at him with broken, yellowed teeth. "It's all I deserve, isn't it?"

"I don't want-"

"Kill him!"

Isaac brought up the sword, and the arrogance in Dodonpa's eyes was replaced by worry and fear. "Wait, boy, don't do it. You wouldn't kill me, would you? I'm only a lonely thief. Cut off my hand, put me in prison, just don't kill me!"

I don't want.

"Kill him!"

"Don't kill me please don't kill me"

He brought the sword down, closing his eyes.

* * *

Isaac woke up with a start.

The sun still beat down on the sand, and he was still just barely hidden from its angry gaze in the shadows.

The heat couldn't reach him. He pulled his knees up to his chest, trying to keep in the warmth.

What would she say if she knew that I was a murderer?

Aren't you intrigued? Well, I'll try to be quicker on updates from now on. Thank you to all of the people who didn't threaten to hurt me, and special thanks to Elena and Midnight C for helping me with a difficult decision. Next update...hopefully soon!

***Chapter 13*: Chapter 12**

Okay, I don't want to spoil anything. Here's the chapter.

Chapter 12

"C'mon, let's go this way," Isaac motioned to a fork in the road.

"No, let's go the other way," Gareth pointed in the opposite direction.

Mia giggled. "You'll get us lost, Gareth. You ALWAYS get us lost."

"I do not!" the Mars Adept replied hotly, folding his arms.
"Fine, we'll
go Isaac's way. Just for you. And when we get lost, it'll be
YOUR
fault, so don't look at me."

"It's not like we're going anywhere," Alex pointed out. "We're
just
walking."

"Let's go Gareth's way, just to make HIM happy," Jenna
agreed. "And then
when we get lost and we can't find our way back to the
school, we can all
blame HIM."

"And eat him when it gets dark and we start to get hungry,"
Ivan added.

Gareth glared at the Jupiter Adept. "We should eat Ivan. He's
not good

for much else."

"I doubt that we'll ever get hungry enough to eat EITHER of you," Picard laughed. The Mercury Adept decided to lead the way, going down the way Isaac had directed. Everyone followed him, even Garet after he had grumbled for a bit.

The day was gorgeous. It was late enough in the fall that the trees had traded in their green for the scarlet, gold, and umber of autumn. The sun was shining brightly, but the cool crisp breeze that caused it to rain leaves kept the air a wonderful temperature.

Mia and Jenna danced ahead, laughing. Mia spun around, the thin rays of sunlight coming through the trees catching in her long blue hair, loose from it's long ponytail for once. She laughed, her eyes sparkling. Jenna, who had gone rather far ahead, used this opportunity to sneak up behind her and drop an armload of leaves on her head.

Shrieking, leaf stems catching in her long hair, Mia started chasing Jenna up the path.

"Don't go too far ahead," Sheba, who was near the back of the group warned them.

"Jenna, be careful!" Felix yelled after his younger sister.

"She's fine, Felix," Picard reassured him, looking highly amused at the two girl's actions.

The two girls disappeared among the towering tree trunks, their laughter echoing back to the small group of Adepts. After a moment, their laughter fell into silence.

"Jenna, get back here!" Felix ordered. "You're going too far ahead!"

The afternoon air was broken by blood chilling screams. The little group came to an abrupt halt.

"JENNA!" Felix, who had gone pale, broke into a run. The rest of the group followed him after a moment.

"Jenna! Mia!" Ivan sprinted ahead of Felix. "Hold on!"

The screams stopped.

"They have to be alright," Isaac could hear Gareth muttering. "Both of them."

"Ivan! Wait for us!" Isaac cautioned the younger Adept. The Jupiter Adept paid him no heed, running through the trees where they had last seen Mia and Jenna, Sheba on his heels.

Dark storm clouds gathered over the sky. Sheets of purple plasma rained down into the trees.

"Ivan! Sheba!" Isaac yelled, breaking through the tree line.

It was a wide meadow, a stream running through the middle of it. Mia was lying face down in the stream, Jenna was over on the other side of the bank, and neither of them were moving.

"MIA! JENNA!" Isaac made for them. Felix made it there before him. He barely gave notice to Mia, dropping to his knees next to Jenna and cradling her head.

"Jenna..." he let out a soft sob. Her throat had been slit, rather effectively. Felix stroked her hair, sobbing.

Isaac dropped to his knees in the stream with a splash, realizing that the water, once clear, was a deep scarlet. He turned Mia over, already knowing what he would see.

A thin line of red across her neck, identical to Jenna's wound. He heard someone kneel in the stream beside him, and Mia's limp body was taken from his hands.

"Oh..Mia." Gareth brushed away a few wet, blood soaked strands of hair from her pale face. "Mia."

His eyes went from a ruddy-brown to crimson in an instant, and the water in the stream warmed. Isaac stumbled out of the water and onto the bank. It started to boil, steam rising in clouds, hiding Gareth and Mia from view.

Numb with shock, Isaac turned to see what else was happening. Over towards the edge of the clearing, Ivan had his staff out and was blocking the huge blade of a Scythe. Its bearer, cloaked in a black that seemed to absorb light, pushed harder, bringing Ivan to his knees. Sheba was crumpled on the ground beside him, and from the amount of blood around her she had suffered the same fate as Mia and Jenna.

Menardi? Could it be her? Isaac got to his feet, drawing the short sword he had strapped to his back. *I...I'll kill her!*

He could hear Picard and Alex behind him, Gareth's howl of agony, and Felix's sobs, but they had faded to mere noise in the background.

She'll pay.

He charged towards the battle, but he was unable to save Ivan. The Jupiter Adept's staff disintegrated, and the Scythe sliced across his neck in one smooth motion. He fell next to Sheba.

She'll pay! Isaac brought up his sword. The Scythe came down, slicing the blade in two with ease. It ignored him, spreading black, skeletal wings, and with a single flap it rose into the air, and shot in towards the other end of the clearing.

Towards where Felix, Garet, Alex and Picard were. Isaac spun, cursing, in time to see the Scythe's next deadly sweep at Felix. The other Venus Adept fell to the ground without a sound. Alex drew his own sword, and Picard pulled his mace from where he had slung it across his back. The Scythe bearer landed, slitting Picard's throat with the weapon, brought up one hand, and a force of Psynergy shattered Alex's sword. Alex backed up a few steps, but his throat was slit, too.

She'll PAY!

Garet had dropped Mia into the stream. He stood, the air around him crackling. There was no sanity or reason in his eyes, the energy emitting from him blackening the grass around him into mere ashes.

He cast Pyroclasm. The Scythe bearer was engulfed in flames.

If that doesn't kill her, I will, Isaac vowed.

The fire died down, leaving a large, circular area burned.

The Scythe bearer was untouched. With something that sounded almost like laughter, it killed Gareth effortlessly.

Isaac threw the hilt of his sword at the bearer. It was hit in the shoulder, and the hilt went black and crumbled into dust. The Venus Adept quickly followed that attack with Grand Gaia. The wings were spread once again, and it rose effortlessly above his attack.

"WHO ARE YOU?!" Isaac screamed, falling to his knees. Everyone he knew, everyone he cared about was dead.

The Scythe bearer landed in front of him. He struggled to his feet, glaring into the shadows beneath the hood. "Who are you?"

It reached up and slid the hood off.

"Isaac, wake up," he was being shaken lightly. Isaac opened his eyes. Gareth was the one shaking him ever so slightly. The sun had set, and cold night had set in. Everyone else was on their feet, looking at him expectantly.

He was still in the Lamakan desert.

A dream, relief flooded through him. *A stupid dream*

With Garet's help he got to his feet, still shaking from the reality that only existed in shadow. *Who was that? Menardi?*

He glanced at her scythe. He couldn't see it clearly in the moonlight, but it looked much smaller than the one in his dream.

But if it wasn't her, then who?

Then he remembered the wings, and shivered. *Death. It must have been Death.*

"C'mon," Menardi glared at him, her eyes glowing eerily in the dark. "We have a long ways to go tonight."

"Isaac?" Mia stood up. "Isaac left here a few days ago. Why? And how do you know Isaac?"

Kyle shook his head. "I didn't expect him to be here."

"Why are you looking for Isaac?" Ivan asked, standing up. Kyle made his way to the porch and sat down with a heavy sigh.

"Isaac is a Venus Adept," Kyle replied with some difficulty. "So are you, Felix."

He gave Felix a tired smile.

"H-how did you know?" Felix asked.

"Who are you, really?" Alex picked up one of the wooden training staffs and held it menacingly. "What do you know about us?"

Kyle smiled again, looking more tired than ever. "I'm a member of the Venus Clan, and Isaac is my son."

Um...yeah. I shouldn't write while listening to Final Fantasy music.

Nope. Nope. Not at all. Especially not "The Man with the Machine

Gun"(Laguna! Laguna! Laguna!) and "One Winged Angel" (Sephiroth!)

Sorry if that first part was kind of confusing. ^_^;;;

Uh...yeah...don't hurt me. Please.

***Chapter 14*: Chapter 13**

Okay, I don't know why, but I just HAD to work on this fic!
Well, I'm
sure you're all not complaining. Are you happy now,
Midnight? Once
again, this chapter is kind of short, but I rather liked it.
::shrugs::
Maybe I'm just weird. Well, whatever, ENJOY!

Chapter 13

Sheba could have cried with relief. She had been raised in the desert, the rolling sand dunes and stones of the Suhalla were her home, but the Lamakan desert had been unbearable, even for her. Seeing the edge of the seemingly endless expanse of sand turn to sagebrush with the promise of forests in the distance nearly made her break down.

But she didn't. The two Mars Adepts didn't look like they would hold with such nonsense. Being killed for shedding tears wasn't something she wanted to happen soon.

"We'll be in Xian soon," Menardi said. She seemed to have taken the role of leader in the group. Her companion, Saturos, seemed more content bark out a few orders and then sit back and watch. She was finding herself

hating the Mars Adept. "You had best all make yourselves presentable, Feh will be most displeased to have an audience with the likes of you."

Sheba looked down at her own clothing, a white and lavender tunic over light mail, in turn over the thinnest of cotton shirts. All of it was torn, soaked with sweat, and dirty beyond compare. Her companions were little better off, Picard's blue and white version of her own attire, Isaac's General uniform, and Garet's simple tunic, vest and breeches were in varying states of wear. Feizhi's pale blue gown was a lost cause completely.

"Come," Saturos growled, setting out at a breakneck pace, leaving everyone else to struggle to keep up.

"What does she mean we'll be in Xian soon?" Feizhi whispered. "It's a good few days walk from here."

Menardi's pointed ears caught every word, despite Feizhi's attempt to soften her words. "Hsu will be bringing a carriage, very soon, I should expect. These are the last few miles that you'll have to walk."

Somehow, despite everything she had been through, the words didn't seem

very reassuring to Sheba.

"I-Isaac's father?" Mia stared at the man before her. It was a moment before she regained her senses. "But, Isaac's father is dead! He told me that himself!"

"There are some things that Isaac doesn't know," Kyle said slowly.

"So, you just abandoned him here?" Mia's voice became high-pitched, and slightly shrill. "You just abandoned him here because you didn't want to take care of him?! He grew up, thinking his parents were dead, and you were alive this whole time-"

"Please, miss," Kyle cut her off. "You don't know the whole story. Who are you?"

"My name is Mia," she replied. "And if you think-"

"Miss Mia, please listen to me," Kyle said softly. "I did not abandon my son here. Of that you can be assured."

"How can we know that?" Alex was still carrying the training staff he had picked up. "How can we even know that you are who you say? You've given us no proof. We don't have any reason to believe you."

Kyle chuckled. "You're right, I have no proof, but I would like you to listen to what I say. May I have all of your names."

"I'm Alex," the Mercury Adept replied. "This is Felix, Jenna, and Ivan."

He motioned to each with the staff.

"Yes, Alex, you are most undoubtedly right," the older man admitted.

"What do you wish to tell us?" Felix asked.

Kyle looked up to the leafy canopy that served as a roof for the porch.

"You are all Adepts, so I have no need to explain Psynergy or Alchemy to you. But tell me, do you know of the four Lighthouses, and the Elemental Stars?"

"I think Aunt Hama said something about them once," Ivan volunteered hesitantly. "She said that the Elemental Stars would light the four Lighthouses, bringing Alchemy back into the land, which could bring the destruction of the Earth."

"Yes, precisely," Kyle nodded. "But I don't believe that she told you everything."

"Yes, the Lighthouses contain all of the powers of Alchemy. Centuries

ago, the four gods decreed it. Sol and Luna agreed. But the seal was never completed. There was a great war, between Venus and Mars. Mercury tried to stand by Venus, but her heart was torn between the two. Jupiter refused to take sides, he lost his life protecting the seals. But they were still damaged. Mars and Venus died, leaving only Mercury. With the last of her powers, she broke up the demi-gods, and they protected the seals.

"But not all of the power was contained. What leaked out created the Adepts. We are the ones that protect the lighthouses, we are the ones who lend our powers to that of Mercury, so that the demi-gods will be forever trapped."

They sat in silence for several moments.

"I was gone. I had to leave, someone had tampered with the Venus Lighthouse. I thought that Dora and Isaac would be fine, but I was wrong," a bitterness that hadn't been there before crept into Kyle's voice. "When I returned, it was to find my dear wife in her grave, and my son had disappeared."

He turned to Mia, haunted shadows in the back of his eyes. "Please, you

must help me. I need to find my son."

The cool interior of the carriage was pure bliss after the heat of the desert. Isaac sighed, leaning back against the plush cushions, wondering how after everything Saturos and Menardi could even stand to be on top of the carriage, out in the heat and the sun.

"We'll be there soon, won't we?" Gareth asked quietly.

"There's no turning back."

"No, there isn't," Isaac shook his head, fingering the band of gold around his wrist. "There never will be."

Gareth closed his eyes and leaned forward, resting his chin in his cupped palms.

"Do you regret leaving?" Isaac asked.

"Yes," Gareth didn't open his eyes. "And no. I told you, there are things I need to figure out. I know Mia won't understand, I don't expect her to ever understand. She's a Mercury Adept, her life centers on being able to heal."

He sighed, and wouldn't say any more.

"I think I know what you're saying," Picard cut through the silence after a moment. "And I think Mia might understand someday, too. She's not as sure of herself as you seem to think."

Garet opened his eyes, and gave the Lemurian a long, measuring look. After a moment, he nodded. "Maybe you're right."

"You're still leaving?"

Mia turned to face Alex with a weak smile. The other Mercury Adept was leaning against the frame of the doorway to her room, his arms folded and a disapproving scowl on his face. "There's nothing here for me."

"Even after what Kyle said?" Alex asked. "Mia, he's all the reason we need to go charging out after Isaac and Garet. Don't you want to see them again?"

"Alex." Mia sighed. "Alex, I want very much to see both of them again, more than you will ever know. But I can't."

"Why not?" Alex asked, coming all the way into the room.

"Kyle's story only hardened my resolve," Mia turned back to her bags. "I can't see either of them again. Ever."

Alex placed his hands on her slender shoulders. "You're not making sense, Mia. Why can't you ever see either of them again?"

"It's difficult to explain, Alex," she gave him a sad smile. "Just let me do this. This is something I need to do."

"But I don't understand."

Mia gave him another sad smile.

See, wasn't that fun? Mia's leaving! AAAAGH! And no, it's not just because I want to get rid of her, she comes back! I promise! Eventually...but I do have a plan! Well, I do hope you enjoyed that, even *I* don't know when the next update is going to be...considering I don't even know how long this fic is going to be...

***Chapter 15*: Chapter 14**

Alright, here it is, the moment you've all been waiting for...Chapter 14!

Isaac: ::in green "Yup. Finally."::
Alright...read!

Chapter 14

Picard had never liked Xian.

The town itself was rather beautiful, but every time he passed through the gates he couldn't help but feel the oppression of its people that seemed to hang upon the very air that he breathed.

They ignored the people in their silk costumes that they passed, heading straight for the largest house towards the back of the town.

Feh was waiting at the beginning of the extensive gardens in front of his home for them.

"Feizhi, I will speak to you later," he gave his daughter a cold look.

"Go inside and wait for me."

"Yes, father," she replied softly, bowing to him before walking slowly up the path.

"Saturos, Menardi," Feh inclined his head to the two Mars Adepts. "Thank

you for bringing my daughter safely home. I trust there were no problems?"

"None," Saturos affirmed.

"Though, the two you originally sent were not as incompetent as you made us believe," Menardi turned her red eyes to Picard and Sheba. They both looked up in surprise. "They managed to retrieve the boy without any assistance from us. We merely guided them through the Lamakan."

"And without the Lemurian, the others would have died from the heat,"

Saturos added. He made them all jump when he drew his sword, but he merely leaned against the gateway to the garden and fingered the slightly chipped edge.

Feh nodded. "They shall be rewarded."

"And who is this?" he seemed to see Gareth for the first time, though it was quite a feat to ignore the tallest member of their group. When Gareth didn't make any move to reply other than glare at him, Feh continued.

"What, is he simple? Is he Isaac's horse boy?"

"My name is Gareth," he finally said softly. "And I am no horse boy."

Picard sneaked a glance over to Gareth, and noticed thin curls of smoke rising from his fingers in the still air.

"Isaac, lead them to the back by the pond," Feh ordered, turning away.
He either hadn't noticed how close Gareth had come to killing him, or he didn't think it was worth his time. "I will be out there as soon as I am done speaking with my daughter."

"You're never going to escape, you know," Saturos looked sullenly out across the pond.

"Feh gave me his word," Picard replied.

"Of course he did, he wanted you to obey," Menardi was giving him a measuring look. "He will never live to his word."

The three of them had chosen to sit on rocks carved for that purpose on the other side of the pond than Sheba, Isaac, and Gareth. Their voices were low enough that the other three could only hear an indistinct murmur.

"And that fool of a girl you travel with will get a lot more than the revenge she bargained for," Saturos threw a rock into the water. He

watched the ripples spread across the previously mirror-like surface before turning to face the Lemurian. "Feh is only using people to further his war. He takes them in, captures them with his words, and never lets go."

"What about you two?" Picard asked, suddenly curious about their words. He thought they had been a law unto themselves until that moment.

"He has my sister in his prisons," Menardi growled, frustrated. "He said he would let her go if we cooperated, but he never will. He'll keep using her, using us, until either we're no longer useful. We'll never see our clan again. Never."

Saturos held up one arm. A thick band of iron encircled his wrist. Though the symbol for Fire had been scratched onto the surface, probably by Saturos himself, Picard knew it for what it was.

A manacle.

The manacles, worn on either wrist, were a symbol of slavery. The life was inescapable until the bands had been removed. If someone was seen with one, they were captured and either returned, sold at an auction, or beaten brutally to death.

Only one Lemurian had ever escaped from slavery. He had been in his prime at the time, and now he was ancient, and failing fast. Though his father had disapproved of it, Picard had learned a great deal from that old man who would wear the mark of slavery until the day he died. He had said that many slaves, if given the opportunity, would cut off their hands to be rid of the bands, and that he had seen many gladly do so. They would bleed to death, but it was with a glad heart, knowing they died with no man owning them.

Picard hadn't believed, or even considered half of those stories until he had come to this harsh, unforgiving continent.

"You're a slave," he said slowly after a minute.

"It will be your fate, too," Menardi warned him.

Picard felt his heart sinking. *A slave. I'll never get home...*

Saturos leaned in close enough that Picard could feel his hot breath on his ear. "Don't lose hope, Lemurian. Not for you, not for your little friends. The leader of our scouting group escaped, and our clan will not take our absence lightly."

Updated because Elena called me up and said in the evil,
scary, robot

voice of doom, death and destruction "ADVENTURES IN
ADEPT TRAINING".

Isaac: ::in the happy special rainbow colored marker "She's
kinda scary,
isn't she."::

Just a little bit. Well, hope you enjoyed! And hopefully when
I get my

new computer I'll be able to update a lot more...oh, and
sorry so short,

but I kinda lost patience with it...hopefully the next part will
be a lot
better...

***Chapter 16*: Chapter 15**

Elena: Gomen this took so long to update. Akiko gave this to me a few days ago, but I currently have no computer ^^; so it had to wait until I got home.

Again, gomen for not getting it up sooner.

Hey, all! Sorry this took so long, inbetween my hectic schedule and

other fun stuff, I haven't had a lot of time to work on this!

But

anyway, on with the story! But first...a note to Virignia

Madison:

I try to update as quickly as I can, and have long chapters, but...well...something about this story gives me long bouts of writer's

block for ridiculously long amounts of time. I'll try to do better...but

as you can see...I REALLY suck at this updating game...

Chapter 15

Mia brushed snow from the shoulders of her thick cloak with gloved hands.

Night had fallen long ago, bringing with it snow flakes that fell quietly

from a sky she couldn't make out. Her hushed footfalls in ankle deep

snow was the only sound in an endless forest of silence. It was a place

of pristine beauty.

If only...I didn't feel this empty... she let out a sigh, and stopped walking. *Oh, Gareth, where are you now?*

Gareth stared at the water. A mere shadow of the blue sky was painted on the ruffled surface, clouds becoming white streaks criss-crossing the inside of the bucket. The light from a blazing sun danced across the ripples and reflected back pale twisting snakes on to the wooden sides and up on his arms and face.

He scooped the liquid up with his hands and splashed it onto the dusty, sweat and blood streaked skin of his face. Water droplets sparkled in his matted hair, and ran down his neck. He used his sleeve to wipe the water away from his eyes, ignoring the hot touch from the metal band around his wrist.

"How are you doing?" Picard asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

He didn't reply, turning to look at the Mercury Adept for a moment before moving on.

"Ply."

Azure sparks encircled him, skipping over the skin and seeping into the

cuts on his arms and chest to re-seal the skin. He looked back at the Mercury Adept, who merely smiled knowingly, his cat eyes flashing. He grinned back, nodding his head slightly. He smiled at Sheba, who was a few places behind Picard. She glanced at him with tired eyes, then looked back at the ground.

He walked alongside the line waiting for water, passing dusty tents and tired men. The sun glared down on the Angaran camp, a god angry at its children for their foolish war.

What was the point of this war again? he wondered, his firey gaze coming to rest on two figures sitting in the shade of the only tree for miles. Feh was obviously discussing something with Isaac, who didn't seem to care. *Oh, that's right, there was never a point.*

He stretched and continued his trek across the dry basin to the slaves' quarters. It was the farthest point from the tiny oasis that was possible to live in. Garet and Picard had been forced to dig the caves they were kept in with alternating Ice Missile and Super Nova attacks. At the time, it had felt like digging their own graves.

Now...it was just a temporary home.

*And to think...two months ago I was living in a school with the woman I

love and all of my friends around me,* he smiled at the memories.

Mia...with her pale skin and flowing blue hair...her feathery touch...the

soft way she spoke her thoughts...the gentle glow in her endless azure

eyes that seemed so unearthly...his angel... *Why does that thought seem

so improbable? Was...it all just a dream? A world I created to fill in

the blanks of my memory?* He shook his head. *No...it was real. It

was.*

A poisonous thought snaked up through the back of his mind. *If it was

real, then why did you leave it behind?*

And in the bottom of a basin, in the midst of war and chaos, he couldn't

give himself an answer.

"Tie up the Mercury Adept! Bind his hands!" one of the men shouted.

Cruel ropes bit into his wrists where they weren't covered by his

sleeves, but he hardly noticed. It was nothing compared to the tight,

constricting pain in his chest.

"ALEX!" someone was screaming his name. *...Jenna?

No...she ran from

here long ago...that voice...*

Someone grabbed his hair and lifted his face up. He found himself looking into a face that looked like something out of a nightmare. It was a pale green color, darker stripes slashing under the eyes and along the man's jaw. Brilliant crimson eyes stared out of that face, right into his.

"You're tired, aren't you?" the eyes began glowing. "Too tired to resist fire..."

Alex closed his eyes, waiting for the end to come. *That voice sounded so familiar...*

The hand holding up his hair released him, and he collapsed on the ground.

"But we're keeping you alive," the voice continued. "Do you know why?"

Alex was too tired to respond. The voice took his silence as a negative.

"You're useful, Mercury Adept. And you'll do as your told."

"Jenna! You're not hurt, are you?" Felix ran to help his limping sister. She had been the last of their group to come out of the forest.

"I'm fine," she muttered, casting Aura on herself.

"Where's Alex?" he looked around her, trying to catch a glimpse of the Mercury Adept.

"He didn't make it out," tears formed in Jenna's eyes. "He didn't...he didn't..."

Ivan sat down, hard. Next to him, Kyle nodded sadly. "He sacrificed himself for us..."

Jenna started sobbing uncontrollably.

Picard turned away from the water basin and walked back to the medical tent. He had only been allowed a short break so he wouldn't pass out.

He couldn't bring himself to hope that it would be the case next time.

He gave Sheba an encouraging smile, and she ignored him.

He passed Saturos and Menardi, standing in line together. The Mars Adept had a tight hold on his mate's hand, like he was afraid of something.

"Picard," Menardi hissed when she caught sight of him, motioning him over frantically with her free hand. He shrugged and walked towards them. He

felt an affinity to the two Mars Adepts. They both were imprisoned...far away from their respective homes. They had talked sometimes, comparing Prox's frozen beauty to Lemuria's ruinous glory.

"Picard, tomorrow is the night," Saturos whispered roughly in his ear.

"Warn Garet and Sheba...and if you can get close to Isaac without his shadow...well...we wouldn't mind keeping him alive, either."

Well...that was interesting...hopefully the next chapter will be more action than angst...

Isaac: ::in blue "And the next chapter might have to wait until Akiko actually GETS to Prox!":
Yeah...that might be a good plan...maybe...

***Chapter 17*: Chapter 16**

And I am FINALLY back with another chapter! My writer's block is gone! Unfortunately, my writer's block is attacking...everything else. So, sorry for the delay. Hopefully my writer's block will clear up soon. *smacks her writer's block with a stick, the stick rebounds and hits her in the face* Ow!

Chapter 16

Picard sighed.

Getting close to Isaac would be a nearly impossible task. He couldn't just walk up to the Head General and ask him for a word alone. He didn't even want to think what would happen to him if he did. In fact, if anyone saw him simply walk up to Isaac and start talking, whether the General was alone or not, he would be whipped at the very least.

I'll have to talk this over with Garet, maybe he can think of something, he mused, casting Douse upon himself before entering the temporary shelter of his cave. The caves may have been shaded, but the sheer amount of slaves kept in their recesses made the heat almost unbearable. The people already occupying the cave backed up hastily, looking up at him with expectant eyes. He sighed and cast Douse again. Water condensed, forming a small, dark grey cloud that emptied its contents, becoming a slight whisp of white that hovered near the ceiling for a moment before dispersing. Picard cast Frost on the puddle, and a small collum of white ice laced with brown rose from the puddle. The slaves huddled around it, pressing their hands against the cold surface and then transferring the cold to their foreheads and the backs of their necks.

Garet was near the back of the cave, his back against the wall, eyes closed. Picard envied him, the heat never bothered the Mars Adept. Garet opened one eye when the Mercury Adept sat down next to him, then closed it again.

"It's tonight," Picard murmured softly, so only Garet could hear him. The other slaves, huddled around the ice chunk, paid them no heed.

"Tonight?" Garet responded, his lips hardly moving.

"The Mars Clan...they're attacking tonight," Picard explained himself more fully. "We need to inform Sheba and...Isaac."

"Good luck," Garet replied. "How exactly do you plan to do that?"

"Well, see, that's where I needed your help..."

Isaac wiped his forehead against his sleeve. He tried to breath normally, but the air around him was so hot it prevented that. The sun beat down on his head, and the wind seemed to have stopped.

It's never been this hot... he squinted in the direction of the blazing sun. *Gods...it's too hot...*

None of the words Feh was saying could penetrate through the heat induced haze surrounding him. He tried desperately to loosen his collar, then removed his gloves.

"General?" Feh asked. The voice seemed to be coming through many layers of cloth surrounding Isaac's brain.

"It's hot," he replied shortly.

"Yes, it is rather hot," Feh agreed, shading his eyes against the sun and glancing upwards. Isaac did the same.

The sky was bleached white by the heat, giving the false hope of clouds and rainfall. Isaac tried to loosen his collar again, choking for breath. The sweat running down his face did little good in the perfectly still air.

The world tilted black, angry red spots swimming over his vision. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was in his tent. He had been stripped down to his breeches, and his head felt like it had been wrapped in hot cotton.

"Get out, get out, I need room," he heard a familiar voice saying. He lay there staring at the ceiling, when suddenly a lot of cold water hit him in the face. He sat up, spluttering a rubbing his eyes.

"Hello Isaac," Picard smiled disarmingly. "Did you have a nice sleep?"

"What happened?" Isaac asked, his mind still felt muddled.

"You passed out, from the heat," Picard explained. He lifted one hand and cast Douse again. Isaac gasped from the shock of cold water against his hot skin. "And of course, they sent for me."

"Oh," Isaac replied, shivering.

"Come down to the slave quarters tonight," Picard whispered in his ear. "The cave where Garet and I are. We'll be alone. Say you have to admonish one of us." He leaned back and cast Ply. The blue light cleared Isaac's head. "There you go,

General. You might want to rest in here for a while, and make sure to drink plenty of water."

"Thank you," Isaac muttered, lying back down.

"I presume it went well," Gareth asked Picard when he returned.

The Mercury Adept, still grinning widely, sat down next to him. "Where did you learn how to do that? It was amazing!"

Garet shrugged. "Just something I picked up."

"Well, it worked perfectly, and Isaac will be paying us a little visit tonight," Picard was still grinning ear to ear.

"I talked to Sheba," Gareth informed him. "She has agreed to share her own private little cave with us."

"Perfect."

Alex stumbled along behind Agatio. The Mars Adept had bound his hands in front of him, and tied a rope around his neck to lead him. The noose scratched the nape of his neck, but he kept his mouth shut. He wouldn't complain.

Their party consisted mostly of Mars Adepts that looked like Agatio. Their skin ranged from green to purple, their upper arms covered with scales like a dragon's. From what Alex had gathered they were from a land called Prox. Judging from their heavy armor and weapons, they were a race of warriors.

Their apparent leader, a violet skinned female taller than he was carrying a huge axe, shouted something in a guttural tongue, and they stopped. Alex fell to his knees, grateful for the break. A water skin was shoved roughly into his hands, and he held it up, clumsily gurgling water. He nearly gagged when it hit his dry mouth and parched throat, but kept drinking greedily, water running in rivlets down his chin. The water skin was taken away, and a chunk of bread replaced it.

"Gather your strength, you'll need it tonight," Agatio told him.

Isaac trudged down the line of slave caves. He couldn't imagine what Picard could want.

He probably wants me to free him...but I can't do that...I thought he knew that...

He got to the cave he knew that Picard and Gareth normally resided in. He stuck in his head, ignoring the stench that accompanied so many people packed into such a tight space.

"Are Gareth or Picard here?" he asked.

Several of the slaves backed away from him, fear in their eyes.

"N-no, sir," one of them answered timidly.

Isaac nodded and continued down the line. He got to the last cave, a tiny thing that Picard and Gareth had dug out specifically for Sheba. Picard, Gareth, Saturos and Menardi were there with the Jupiter Adept, lounging in the cold air

brought on by the night. He stepped into the entrance, not sure what to do.

"Take a seat, Isaac," Gareth motioned to the floor. Isaac nodded and sat down on the dusty ground, moving his cloak out of his way.

"Here," Menardi handed him a pair of plain leather breeches and a plain white shirt. "You'll need these."

Isaac took them from her gingerly. They didn't smell very clean, and he didn't really want to know where she got them. "What are you-"

"Tonight, General, you're a slave," Saturos informed him. "Because my people will kill you otherwise."

And there you have it! I hope you loved it! I hope it was worth the long wait!

Elena: Well, Picard's in it, so therefore it was.

What are you doing here?

Elena: I am taking over you mind.

Oh. Okay.

Elena: Pow pow Picard!

AAAGH! Wrong fic already!

***Chapter 18*: Chapter 17**

Adventures in Adept Training

Chapter 17

All of the tents caught ablaze at once, flickering light burning away the darkness and bringing to life a roar of sound that filled the basin to overflowing. Warriors seem to simply appear in the confusion, metal armor reflecting the light of tents smoldering like unholy suns. They drew their weapons, cutting into the ill prepared army like reapers gathering in the harvest.

"To arms! To arms!" a soldier riding through the smoke and flame screamed. "To ar-"

A large scythe stained with blood and soot arched up, catching the rider in the chest and sweeping him from his saddle.

Isaac stared out at the massacre, a strangely empty look on his face.

"Don't do anything stupid," Menardi warned him, pressing the manacle on her right wrist into the back of his neck.

"They need me to lead them," he replied quietly. "I am their General...it's my duty...I can't let them die-"

"Duty or not, you going out there now would be useless," Saturos reminded him, at apparent ease leaning against the cave wall. "You would be killed before you could do a single thing."

"But-"

"There's nothing you can do except waste the efforts that the people here put into saving your life," Saturos opened his eyes. The red irises glowed in the firelight like brilliant rubies. Isaac sighed in defeat, allowing Menardi to push him to the opposite side of the cave.

Alex felt like throwing up. The stench of burning flesh was overwhelming, the massacre in front of him almost more than his mind could take.

He tried to hold back the horror and pain clawing at the back of his eyes, casting a glance on yet another member of the warrior clan. All around him people were screaming and dying, pleas for mercy and life filling the basin like the smoke still rising on the air that made his eyes sting and his lungs hurt.

Finally, when he was about to collapse from the overwhelming images around him, Agatio pushed him towards a small cave in the hillside. "The people we are trying to save are in there. Stay with them."

Alex nodded dumbly and ran for it, stepping over and around corpses and mangled bodies pleading with their last breath for life. Just as he got to the cave, an arrow hit him in the small of his back, and he was thrown forward.

He landed hard on his stomach, the air knocked out of him. He felt pain explode near his spine, and if he any breath had been left to him he would have screamed. A pale blue light filled the cave, and the pain subsided.

After a moment he rose to his hands and knees and looked around him.

Picard was kneeling next to him, a tired look in the Lemurian's golden eyes. Sheba and Gareth were sitting near the back, Isaac was hovering worriedly near him, and two members of the Mars Clan that he didn't recognize were leaning against the wall closest to him.

"Who's this?" the female, who's features could barely be picked out in the gloom, asked.

"A friend," Picard replied shortly.

"Oh," the female nodded. "So, how are things out there?"

Kyle's boots slid on the grass at the edge of the basin, and he stopped short of tumbling over the edge.

The bottom was filled with fire and blood. He heard Felix, Jenna, and Ivan gasp.

"C'mon!" he urged them, and began climbing down the slope.

They all hesitated for a moment, then began to follow him.

"Looks like it's time to make our grand entrance," Saturos hissed, leaving the cave. He was quickly followed by Menardi. She turned and motioned to the other prisoners, who quickly got upright and exited the cave behind her.

There were still a few fights going on, but those promised to not last long. A large, lean female was interrogating Feh, and being questioned by an equally large male...

"Garet!" Jenna screamed when she saw him.

The male backhanded her across the face. "Shut up."

"Where is Karst?!" the female screamed at Feh.

"Sh-she's in Vale...at Sol Sanctum..." Feh answered shakily.

"For what purpose?" her crimson eyes flashed dangerously.

"To create the ultimate weapon," Feh replied shakily, drawing himself to his full height, a fierce pride in his eyes. "With it we will crush Gondowan...so I have been promised by the elders of Vale!"

She sliced his throat with one swift movement. "What do the other prisoners have to say?"

"They have no information," the male growled, putting the edge of his broadsword up against Jenna's cheek.

"Then kill them," she replied.

He smiled, pressing his broadsword gently. Jenna whimpered, blood running down her cheek.

Even as Garet was aware that Alex was yelling at them to stop, and Saturos and Menardi seemed to have realized that the condemned prisoners were not the enemy and were motioning wildly at the male to stop, he could feel fire rising inside of him. The familiar red misted his vision, and the last thing he did rationally was to tug a broadsword from the broken corpse of a soldier.

Agatio took his broadsword away when he heard Saturos's command to stop. Alex ran past him and put one hand to the

girl's cheek, blue sparks healing the damage he had done there.

A bright flash of light caused him to turn around. One of the Adepts that had accompanied Saturos and Menardi was standing in the middle of a now cleared space, the rocks around him cracked and blackened. The Adept raised his sword, his eyes burning scarlet.

The other Mercury Adept cast Freeze Prism. Water collected in the air above the Mars Adept, froze and crashed down on him all in the blink of an eye. The ice shattered and melted before it even reached him. The Mercury Adept cursed, then turned to Agatio.

"Your sword, please," he held out on hand.

Agatio clutched his sword possessively, until the leader barked an order to him, then quickly handed it to the Adept hilt first. Smiling, the Adept took it from him, tested the balance, then swung it once before turning around and walking slow, measured steps toward the Mars Adept.

Eee...scary! But promises of a quick update, since I've been sort of

planning this...

Isaac: ::in gold "Aki...your mom scares me..."::

...Where have you been?

Isaac: ::in silver "I mean, she's just randomly walking into your room

and leaving! That's just weird!"::

::shrugs:: Anywho, review! And...hopefully I won't take forever to

update...

***Chapter 19*: Chapter 18**

Chapter 18

Picard dashed forward, his thin boots slapping against the dusty earth. He brought up Agatio's sword and brought it down. Gareth held up his own sword, glowing a sullen red with heat. The blades met with a clash like bells in a storm, sparks flying upon contact. Picard retreated a step, his feet sliding in ashes that rose in black clouds around his ankles, then attacked at Gareth's side. The Mars Adept blocked his attack with ease, knocking his sword back and jabbing forward when Picard stumbled. He jerked to the side, but the edge still caught him along the ribs, burning and cutting all at once. A gasp escaped him, and he stumbled backwards, eyes still locked on his opponent.

The Mars Adept lunged at him, and Picard ducked under the swing, jabbing upwards and passing the hilt to his left hand, cutting outwards. Gareth didn't register the fact that Picard had just cut deep into his abdomen. He changed direction, heat surrounding his blade, burning Picard's hands and shorning his sword off at the hand guard. He turned the sword and hit Picard with the pommel on the shoulder, sending him onto his back, rendering his left arm useless.

The Mercury Adept cursed and froze the hilt of his sword with a quick frost attack before throwing it. Gareth blocked it with his bare hand and brought up his sword again.

Picard scrambled backwards, grabbing a shield as he went. The heated sword cut through the metal like butter, and sliced vertically down his chest. He bit back a scream, staring at the Mars Adept, searching desperately for anything to defend himself with his good hand.

Garet held up one hand, fire gathering around his fingers. Picard cast Mega Cool, hoping the ice spearing up from the ground would keep his opponent occupied for at least a moment. Not bothering to see if his ploy had worked, he cast Pure Ply on himself and got to his feet, taking a rapier in his hand as he did so.

The Mega Cool had melted, and Garet didn't seem to be slowing down despite his wounds. Picard rose one hand, and a colossal chunk of ice formed above the Mars Adept, smashing down before it could melt. Azure light gathering at his sword tip, Picard hit the ice with lightening fast jabs. He got to the center where Garet had melted a hollow for himself, and was met by a swing of the broadsword. He brought up the lighter sword he had found on the ground. The sound of metal at two extreme temperatures meeting was nearly unbearable. Garet's sword cut through his once again, and the tip shattered. The Mars Adept appeared to take no notice, changing his technique to suit the shorter blade. He hit Picard in the chest with the flat of it. Picard screamed that time, the hot metal burning clothing and flesh. He was thrown into the sharp remains of his own attack, the razor edges slicing through the thing material of his shirt and into the skin. He fell to his knees, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps.

"Ply," he muttered, seeing blue light through his eyelids. The pain in his chest and back eased enough that he could stand. He held up the half of his sword that remained, forming the other half from pure ice. He looked around hesitantly, the water from the ice had evaporated, and he was blinded in the steam cloud. He felt panic for a moment, then calmly closed his eyes, knees slightly bent, sword held at the ready.

After an eternity, he felt something hotter than the steam to his left. He turned quickly and stabbed with his ice sword. The Mars Adept didn't bring his own sword up fast enough, and the ice pierced through his shoulder. The ice melted, and Picard drove the metal into the cut. Gareth cast some sort of Fire Psynergy right in his face.

Picard cast Deluge, hoping against hope for a miracle. Some of the fire sputtered and died in midair, but more still hit him. He collapsed backwards, unable to breathe through the heat burned his throat and lungs. He cast a feeble ply, feeling some of the burns healing. He could dimly see Gareth over him, sword held to stab downwards.

Death was a strange thought for Picard. The thought of Death embracing him had never even crossed his mind when he had lived in Lemuria.

And now he had seen enough Death to last a lifetime.

With the last dredges of his energy, he made another sword of ice, his palm sliding on the cold hilt. He thrust it upwards, feeling the blade melt even as he did.

For a moment he couldn't think where he was. Then something heavy collapsed on top of him, and he drifted into darkness.

"GARET!" Jenna screamed. "GARET!"

She broke free of Felix's gentle restraint and ran forward. She kneeled next to the prone form of the Mars Adept, and quickly cast Cool Aura. She watched the wound that ran through his chest began to close slowly, and cast it again. The area affect was healing the angry red burns on Picard's

face, her own bruises and aches eased, and the other Adepts seemed to snap out of the stupor they had fallen into.

"Well done," an amused sounding voice told her. She looked up to see Kyle standing behind her. "Who knew a Mars Adept would be able to heal."

"I am pretty unique," she smiled tiredly at him.

"Wh-who are you?"

Kyle turned to face Isaac, who was giving him a look Jenna had never seen on anyone's face.

And...that's all! Mwahahahahahahahaha! ^_^ I hope that didn't suck as much as I think it did...